



## AT YARRAWONGA



Towing the big trailer with the main shelter structure behind the X-Trail was tense but the long drive to Yarrawonga was uneventful. It was tense because neither of us were used to towing such a big thing, and even though it was much better to tow than it was when we had the outriggers and hulls on the roof, whoever wasn't driving was forever craning around to check that it was still where it should be, and whoever was driving had one eye on the road and the other on the rear vision mirror. We arrived at the Yarrawonga Caravan Park late on the Sunday afternoon before Melbourne Cup Day, having left home at 5am and shared the driving. My long-time mate Alan Key drove down from Albury and joined us early the next day – he wanted to be there for the launching and came down to give us a hand getting the raft all mantled again and ready for the river.



Brian and Erica Thackeray - more old friends - happened to be in the area doing a sort of golf-course crawl along the Murray, and they dropped by on the Monday afternoon on their way to Tocumwal to see how the launching preparations were going. They watched bemused as we readied the weird-looking craft for its journey down river, and clearly thought we were mad – especially with me buzzing around high on anxiety, worrying about all the things I could think of that could possibly go wrong.

By the time Kent arrived on the Monday afternoon we had the raft roof lifted up again, the side-curtains on, the solar panels hooked up and everything ready to go except for attaching the outriggers with the cat hulls. That was a job for first thing in the morning on Tuesday. Alan slept in his van and Kent slept on the raft where it was parked near the launching ramp. Lo and I spent a second night in the cabin we'd rented in the caravan park.

Tuesday morning saw us all up at sparrowfart. The launching ramp at Yarrawonga is pretty steep, my X-Trail is pretty light, and the raft was fully-laden, so we decided to back it down the ramp into the water with Kent's Rangie. Not being renowned for my trailer-backing, I was quite happy to leave the driving to Kent. He parked it halfway down the ramp and in what seemed like no time at all Kent and Alan had the outriggers slid into their slots and the holding bolts done up tight. There was about 50mm clearance between the cat hull bottoms and the abrasive cement of the ramp, so the launching had to be smooth.



Getting the raft into the river the rest of the way was a breeze, and before long we had the kellick out into the sand of the nice little beach adjacent to the launching ramp, with the raft sitting pretty on the river just like it was supposed to. Things were starting to look good.

Kent was going to come down the river with us as far as Cobram, the next main town down the Murray from Yarrawonga, so he and Alan drove off in convoy to Cobram to find somewhere that Kent could leave the Rangie and Keith-next-door's trailer. While they were gone I arranged to take the X-Trail and the big trailer to the storage area at the Yarrawonga Caravan park, where it would stay till I came back by local bus to pick it up when we had completed the first leg of our journey downriver. Ah! The logistics of it all!

I ambled back to the launching ramp and boarded the raft, where Lo was pottering about getting things fine-tuned. It was about 10 in the morning by this, and being on the raft actually floating on the Murray felt like something of a milestone, so Lo set about making a cup of mornos to mark the occasion. When we were out on Dora Creek doing our initial sea trials the little stove that Keith-next-door had given us had worked a treat after we'd had it refurbished, but now, just before we were about to take off into regions unknown, it scarcely threw any sort of flame at all out of the gas jets, and after having the kettle over it for about twenty minutes the coffee water was still only warm. Kent and Al had arrived back from Cobram by this, and all the fiddling in the world with regulators and gas jet juggling did nothing to improve matters in the water heating department.

"OK," says muggins, decisively, "we can't seriously consider doing this trip with a stove you can't cook on. I'm going to drive up to beautiful downtown Yarrawonga and buy a new camp stove and be done with it." When I got up to the shops I was dismayed to find that quite a few hadn't bothered to open that morning, because the Melbourne Cup was to be run that afternoon, and there was quite a holiday atmosphere about the place. Of course, wouldn't you know it, one of the stores that hadn't opened was the camping supplies place. I could see two and three-burner campstoves on display in the window – just what we needed, but the door was obdurately locked. If I couldn't get a stove, what would we do? If we waited till the next day till the camping store opened we wouldn't get to Cobram in time for Kent to pick up the Rangie, take Keith's trailer back to Lo's place, and report for work on the tug in four days' time. If we took off for Cobram anyway, with the dud stove, we wouldn't be able to cook anything for several days. I sat uncomfortably on the horns of this dilemma in the main street of Yarrawonga for some time, trying to work out what my next move should be.

Still not quite knowing what to do I went into an auto spare parts place and asked them if they knew of anywhere in town I might be able to buy a stove. The woman behind the counter was surprised to hear that the camping supplies place was closed, and asked me just what sort of stove I was after. When I told her, her face lit up and she said: "We've got a stove just like that, and we were going to try and sell it at the garage sale we're having next weekend. It's only ever been used once. If you like, you can follow me to my place and I'll show it to you, to see if it'll do." This was a hopeful development, so I told her it sounded like a good idea to me, and in no time I was following her scarlet hotted-up Commodore ute out of town. She hadn't said how far it was to her place, and we hadn't talked money. What would I do if she tried to take advantage of my predicament and ask a high price for a so-so stove? I wondered if she had any idea how much of a barrel she had me over.

We drove straight out of town for quite some kilometres, then turned left off the Murray Valley Highway into a housing development area which was sitting smack in the middle of nowhere. It was a completely new estate on the edge of an unimpressive part of Mulwala Lake (which backs up behind the Yarrowonga Weir and in this part was chockers with grey, dead ex-trees). Every house was new, every garden was in the throes of being landscaped, and I'd take a small wager that they all looked pretty much the same inside, because they all looked pretty much the same outside. Nick Scali country. After a bewildering number of turns as we threaded our way through the maze of new kerbing we ended up at a waterfront two-storey house that was indistinguishable from all the others, and I followed into the back yard and waited outside a metal shed while she went to get a key.

She opened the shed, and for about twenty minutes proceeded to hurl most of its contents onto the sandy area outside the shed door. I stood back, half-prepared for her not to be able to find the stove, but eventually I heard a little cry of triumph as she passed out to me one of those orange, very tinny campstoves. It had two burners, and was encrusted in very old dried fat. If it had been used only once as she claimed it must have been at a regimental long weekend sausage-sizzle. Still, I would have had to pay well over a hundred dollars to buy it new if the camping shop had been open.

"And here's the connector tube to the gas bottle, as well. What do you reckon? About twenty bucks be OK?"

Although I still hadn't worked out how high I was prepared to go to get a cooking implement, when I heard her say \$20 I whipped out a twenty dollar bill, shoved the stove in the back of the car, and after a wry remark about my chances of finding my way back to the highway I was off in high revs and low gear. As I drove back I reflected on how preoccupied I'd been with the possibility of being ripped off, when really my experience had been the opposite. The woman had left her shop to take me home, and solved my problem for a quite reasonable sum, and all I could think about was possible chicanery.

*Meanwhile, back on the raft, I had finished getting things sorted and stowed away. The curtains were now hanging, and the groceries and clothes were in their designated storage places. The others had arrived back from Cobram. And we waited for Bill to return. And waited. And waited. Town was only a*



*couple of blocks away – I had walked up earlier in the morning to get a few last minute supplies like fresh milk – but Bill had decided to take the car before he locked it up in the safe storage area for the duration. After he had been gone about an hour I was starting to get seriously worried. How long does it take to buy a gas stove in a small town with only one camping shop? Kent was just about to head off up to look for him when he finally appeared, very proud of himself with the orange Primus tucked under his arm. Once we had set off, I set to cleaning up the centimetre-deep layer of congealed fat lying disgustingly on the*

*bottom tray of the stove. But once that was done, she was a little beauty, and although it lacked the grill of the other stove, I knew I could manage perfectly well cooking on a two burner gas stove for several weeks.*

## YARRAWONGA TO ZANETTI'S BEACH

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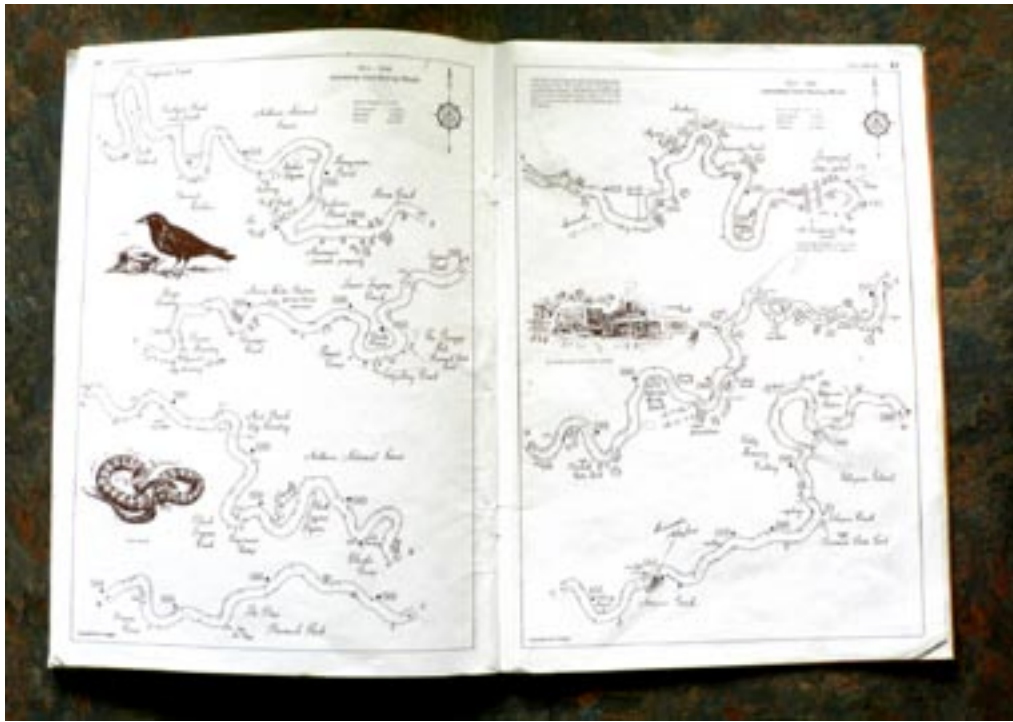
We waved goodbye to Al just before noon, and set off downriver. Immediately we got underway it became apparent that the raft handled differently when it was fully laden compared to the way it had behaved during the sea trials on Dora Creek. While on the creek we'd noticed that the fore and aft stability wasn't all that it might be. Because the cat hulls came to a very delicate, sharp, and streamlined point at both ends, the buoyancy at either end was considerably compromised, and if one person went out on the bow deck, for example, then someone else would have to move towards the aft deck to compensate for the weight shift. But not enough to be too much of a worry, we all thought, at the sea-trial stage.



As we pulled away from the ramp and headed downstream, however, we found it was quite a different story with the raft fully laden and one extra body aboard. What had been 150-180mm of freeboard on the hulls had become more like 50mm, and the slightest movement of any of us toward one end or other caused the end of the hulls to go under, and they stayed under unless the fore and aft trim of the vessel was spot on. It wasn't as though we were likely to tip up or anything, though. Each hull had a screw-in inspection hatch about a metre from each end, and we couldn't vouch for their watertightness, so all the time any end was under the water we were probably taking water into the hulls, and these covers were now spending quite a lot of time underwater. This was a heluva time to make this discovery, but there was nothing we could do about it at this late stage, so we had no choice but to continue downriver and make the best of it – telling ourselves that it would be better after Cobram, when we'd be lighter by Kent's weight. Otherwise things seemed to be going OK. The current seemed a bit stronger than we'd anticipated once you were subject to it out in the middle, and with the motor at only  $\frac{1}{4}$  throttle we were trucking down the river at quite a creditable rate. Kent was doing most of the steering, and Lo and I were highly pleased to be underway at last. The weather was good, and things were going fine.



*There was a sign on the riverbank as we left the launching ramp which said "1998". The river guide books had explained that there were signs every 2 km along the entire length of the river, so you could tell how far you were from the mouth, or work out how far you had travelled on a particular journey. So we set off at 1998, knowing that meant it was just short of 2000 km to Goolwa, at the mouth of the river. At times the river chart would note if a sign was missing, and at other times we couldn't find it even though it was marked – perhaps it had gone missing since the last update of the chart. Those signs every 2 km were reassuring, and they made it very easy to be able to pinpoint exactly where we were on the chart and on the river.*



*The river charts we had bought were great – they followed every curve and kink of the river. They showed where there were pumps, sandy beaches, snags, overhanging trees, and even buildings which could be seen from the river. But they did not give any other context. We knew that when we moored in the evenings we would probably want to go for a walk to explore our surroundings, but without further information, we would not know if we were on private property, or in a forest reserve, or a park. So we needed to have a collection of land maps as well – so we could tell if we were passing through a forest, (with its inevitable maze of dirt tracks) or if there was a major road nearby. As we travelled along I would often have three or four maps open on the table, to integrate in my mind all the different information they provided.*



*Much of the land adjacent to the river in the upper sections of the Murray remains in public ownership as it was flood-prone back in the days when the river was less regulated and the river regularly flooded the redgum forests to water and nourish them. These days floods are rare and water is only occasionally spared from the economic demands of irrigation to allow the natural vegetation and habitats to receive an occasional soaking. The gradual decline in the health of the rivergums reflects this commercial imperative.*

After about an hour or so we reckoned we'd gone about 8km. It was getting towards 1 o'clock, so we thought we might stop for a spot of lunch. I tossed the pick out over the back, thinking that we would just come to a halt in the middle of the river, and swing around on the anchor rope while we had a leisurely lunch. The anchor dragged along the sandy bottom for a while, then took hold. Lo began to put some lunch together, and Kent busied himself working out a way to make sure we didn't accidentally lose overboard the emergency stop/start lanyard thing that's supposed to turn the motor off if you fall in or something. Then I noticed that the pick wasn't holding any more, and we were drifting slowly downstream with the current once again. I mentioned this to the others, but none of us was too perturbed. The river was quite wide at this point, and several metres deep, and we were right out in the middle. We figured the anchor would probably dig in or catch on something before too long. We must have been moving down stream considerably faster than any of us realised, though, because the next time I looked up we had drifted into an area with lots of snags sticking out of the water, and before we knew what was happening we were right in amongst them.



The current seemed much faster when you got close to things, and the snags were old and as hard as mild steel. Before any of us could do anything we had bounced off one tree branch with a thud, swung around a little, and collided with another. Then we realised that we had stopped going anywhere. Kent started the motor to get us back out into the middle of the river again, but it soon became apparent that we were firmly stuck in the one place. I clambered out onto the downstream cat hull and lay down along it so I could feel along its underside below the waterline. It took no time to work out that we were well and truly wed to this particular snag that had been lying about 150mm below the surface. It was a branch about as thick as your arm, and it had penetrated the hull. I showed it to Kent, and all the while the holed hull is shipping water at a great rate.

Action-man Kent has a quick look at the situation, strips off, and the next thing I know he's in the water up to his armpits, standing on an underwater fork of the huge snag we were impaled on. Everyone's yelling at everyone else, but

Kent was yelling the loudest. "Lorraine, stay on that side to compensate for the water in the hull on this side. Bill, get to the motor, throw it into reverse and hard to port and gun the guts out of it. I'll try to push it up and off from here." And he bloody well did. Red-faced from the strain, by sheer brute strength he lifted the deadweight of the pierced hull up and off the branch, the raft responded sluggishly to the motor, and we were back in deep water again. I don't recall how Kent managed to get back on board, but we were soon headed straight across the river to the other side with him at the helm where, as luck would have it, there was a gently shelving sandy beach. We must have been a sight crossing the river, with the motor roaring flat out (it made quite a row on full throttle – so much for getting a 4-stroke for a nice quiet ride), Kent having trouble steering it, and Lo and I hanging out off the unpierced side like a couple of crewmen on a 16-footer.

The beach shelved so gently into the water that we ran aground while the bow was still about three metres from the shore. We sat down to take stock of the situation. Kent was talking about hitching back into Yarrawonga to buy several fibreglass repair kits, but before we did anything else we had to get the raft out of the water and up onto the land, and this wasn't going to be easy because of the weight of water that was now in the pierced hull.

Inspired by the example of Captain Cook when he holed the *Endeavour* off the Barrier Reef, the first thing Kent tried was swathing the area around the hole in the hull in black plastic bags and duct tape so he could try to pump the water out of the hull using the mickey mouse little SuperCheapAuto electric pump that we used to suck water out of a bucket for a shower. It took about fifteen minutes to get it all set up, and about fifteen seconds of pumping to realise that this idea most assuredly was not going to be a goer.

The nearest trees of any substantial girth were a good thirty metres away, so we tied together some ropes and fastened the bow to the nearest one. Then, with Kent back in the water pushing at the back of the raft, Lorraine and I together ran at the middle of the rope, pushing it as hard and as far as we could to one side, thus shortening it. Each rush at the rope, with Kent pushing the raft from behind, got us about 200mm closer to the shore, and then we'd re-tie the rope around the tree as tight as we could and do the rope-rush/push thing again. After about ten goes like this we had the bow just to the edge of the water. And we were stuffed.



We could see the extent of the damage now. It was much more than we'd assumed. There was a slit where the branch had gone in, but with all the movement that would have happened between getting it on and getting it off there was a tear from one side of the hole running lengthwise down the hull for about a couple of handspans. Later, when we'd taken the cat hulls right off the outriggers and turned them upside down we could see how rotten they were, how totally past their use-by date they were, like soggy fragile eggshells. They were, after all, early 1970s vintage, and had been designed and built primarily for speed, not strength. But apart from being surprised to see how thin the walls were, there was something about the texture and feel of the fibreglass wall itself that suggested that it was no longer the strong and flexible material that it once was. It was like wet cardboard, almost - totally fatigued and on its last legs with old age. (Yes. The obvious parallel did come to mind.) Nothing during the earlier trials had betrayed the fact that they were so badly deteriorated. Although it had seemed like a good idea at the time, cat hulls obviously weren't the ideal means of flotation for snaggy and fast-flowing rivers.

By this time it's about 3:30. You know how I mentioned very early in this account Lorraine's addiction to maps and other useful information? Well, this is a good example of it being put to good use. She went into the raft and came out with a couple of maps of the Murray, and in no time had our position pinpointed. Then she went to the other map which not only showed where we were in relation to the Murray Valley Highway, but also indicated the maze of dirt tracks that webbed the area between us and the highway. We pored over these for a while, and Kent came up with the next move: "Look. It's about five or six Ks to the highway. I'll take this map and find my way out and hitch a ride back to Yarrawonga. Then I can bring the X-Trail and the raft trailer back. We'll have to get it right out of the water and up onto the trailer to repair the hulls, however we end up doing it."

"Yeah," I muttered from the depths of my pessimism, "we'll need it up on the trailer to tow it to the bloody tip too, if that's the way it all pans out." So, not long afterwards and fortified with a cup of coffee, Kent struck out into the bush.

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He'd been gone about three quarters of an hour I suppose, and Lorraine and I were sitting glumly in the raft shelter, watching a lowering bluey/grey storm cloud making its way up the reach towards us. (It turns out that we were to become quite accustomed to watching and listening to approaching storms like this on this trip). Suddenly there was nothing but torrential rain, loud and heavy, and we wondered if Kent was being drenched by it, or if he had picked up a lift in time to stay dry.



As it happened, he'd found his way to the highway by a fairly direct route (thanks to Lo's map) and the first truck he showed his thumb to picked him up and dropped him at Yarrawonga. He was driving back into the clearing near the raft in the X-trail with the trailer in tow by about dusk. We settled down to have our evening meal and pass the night in the raft. The sand sloped so gently it was damn near level. Kent seemed quite unintimidated by tomorrow's task of getting the raft back up onto the trailer, but I was buggered if I could see how it could be done given the circumstances we were in. Kent seemed to look forward to the challenges our predicament presented to us, whereas I just tried not to think about all the possible complications that my vivid but jaundiced imagination had no trouble dreaming up. (Sometimes I'm surprised that they both still talk to me. I must have been a prize shit to have to put up with.)

*Bill was quite depressed by the afternoon's events, his mood blackening as rapidly and heavily as the thunderclouds which passed over during the afternoon. He was quite ready at that stage to throw in the towel. A couple of drinks made him even more gloomy about our prospects. I mean, how many challenges do you expect a bloke to face in one week? "Yes, you have an aggressive cancer of your prostate, but you might as well go away on your trip, as we can't get you a specialist appointment for 6 weeks". Then the venture he has been working on so stoically for the past couple of years, trying to distract himself from the increasing arthralgia which was randomly striking different parts of his body, comes to grief only a couple of hours into what was planned to be a 2000 km journey.*

*But after the thunder storm passed the sun came out again, with a brilliant rainbow. The most wonderful light glowed along the river – something those of us who live along the coast never get to see. How could we pass up the opportunity to see a few more samples of the beautiful colours and subtle mood changes of the Murray? Two or three more reds and another cone and Bill started to become a bit cheerier, and even started to see some merit in the plans Kent was formulating. Two or three more, and he began to join Kent and me in seeing our dilemma as a temporary obstacle, rather than a terminal disaster!*



Over dinner we canvassed all the possibilities we had open to us as to what to do next. The cat hulls were past it, well and truly. Once we'd seen the size of the puncture and the condition of the hull walls and how easy it was to put a hole in them there was no way we'd contemplate trying to go further down the river on them. There was only one thing to do, really, and that was to replace the

cat hulls with something that gave much better buoyancy, something like a couple of six-metre lengths of 400mm polypipe with end caps heat-welded on – just like we'd wanted to do at the outset! We were right in the middle of Bigtime Irrigation Country, so we figured that it shouldn't be too hard to find an irrigation supplier and fabricator to make them up for us. The main question was how long it would take to do it. We were supposed to be dropping Kent off at Cobram the day after next, but there was no way we'd be doing that given the situation we now found ourselves in. Remember, Kent had a non-negotiable deadline to

go back to work on the *Wato* in a few days, and if it took several days to make up the new pontoons he wouldn't be around to help us attach them. And they would be too heavy for Lo and I to lift on our own. It's times like these that I inwardly 'rage against the dying of the light' because you feel acutely the inexorability of that process of being forced to lower your expectations of yourself as you get further down the track and can physically do less and less. Oh well, we'd just have to hire some muscle power to help us lift stuff if Kent couldn't be there. Having agreed to go ahead and try to track down some poly pontoons first thing in the morning, we turned in for the night.

I woke out of a fitful sleep about 2am and couldn't get back to sleep. You know how it is with intractable problems at that hour – I just kept going over and over our situation, worrying away at it, seeing it in a bleaker and bleaker light the more I obsessed over it. So I came to see it all rather differently to the way it looked when we'd discussed it earlier and made up our minds what we were going to do. In the morning I woke with the same jaundiced view of our situation that I'd generated in the wee small hours, and raised my concerns over breakfast.

"Look. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to face up to when you're licked. It's all very romantic to struggle on against insuperable odds and all that, but I reckon we're fucked. We're only an hour or so away from our starting point, yet already we've got a boat that won't float." I began to warm to my pessimistic view. "Where's the point in throwing good money after bad? If the Newcastle mob were anything to go by it's going to set us back another two and a half grand to get polypipe pontoons made up and God knows how long it's likely to take. And it's not as though either of us has recently retired as a failed CEO of a multinational company – we're just a pair of pensioners and we don't have too many thousands to throw around. And the other thing I realised is that once Kent leaves to go back to work, Lorraine and I won't have the luxury of changing our mind and calling it a day. Kent will have taken Keith-next-door's trailer back with him, and we won't be able to even get the raft to the bloody tip if we really do throw in the towel." (Or words to that effect).

There was a long, awkward silence. Then Kent replied, in the levellest of tones: "Look, Bill. I don't need this right now. I don't need some miseryguts only finding problems with everything. I need someone to come and help me get this bloody show back on the road, and see it as a challenge to be overcome, not something to be overcome by. What's more, we haven't got much time to do it in. We don't know what we can do until we try, and trying isn't helped by your attitude. There's absolutely no point in looking at things that way. So come and let's get on with it." (Or words to that effect.)

I don't think I'd been so comprehensively and eloquently chastised since I was a kid, and I sat there red-faced while there was another awkward silence. But of course he was right. And I realised this. His reprimand had been a much-needed kick in the arse for me, so I got up, told him that he had convinced me that he was right, apologised to both of them and said: "Well, what are we waiting for? Let's hit the froggen." Lorraine stayed with the raft (there's no way we could lock it up) and Kent and I took off for Cobram to look for large-diameter polypipe.

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We drove into Cobram – about 30kms, from memory. The irrigation business there couldn't weld the end-caps on, but they directed us to a place in Finley, another 70kms or so vaguely north. It wasn't too hard to find the place. They were just off the main road through town - an outfit called Archer.

It was around half past ten as we drove up. They were in one of those huge, gloomy, high-roofed industrial sheds that seemed to be made almost exclusively of rusted corrugated iron and felt like a hollow three stories once you were inside. There were four or five blokes busy with various tasks. As we walked in the first thing I saw was a guy in overalls standing in front of a cylinder of polypropylene about six feet in diameter. It had chalk marks all over it, and the wall of it would have been at least 25mm thick. While we were still trying to work out who to approach, the overalled guy picks up a chainsaw and starts to cut around the chalk lines – really straight and even. It was a pleasure to watch such a brute of a cutting implement handled with such precision and sureness. It was like he was sculpting. God knows what he was making, and I wasn't about to try to ask him over the roar of the chainsaw.

Kent caught the eye of one of the other blokes and asked him who the boss was. He pointed out a youngish guy - I don't think he would have been thirty – who was strolling out of the little office in the corner of the vast, hanger-like space. Kent told him what we were after, and he said it wouldn't be a problem – they did that sort of thing all the time. In fact, as we were leaving some time later we passed two guys heat-welding an end cap onto a big bit of polypipe just like we were after.

Anyway... we'd established that they could fabricate what we wanted, but there were still the two most delicate matters to be negotiated – delivery time and price. Kent explained to this bloke how he had to be back in Newcastle to work on the tugs in a couple of days, and how awkward it would be if he had to leave before we could get the pontoons on. I don't know what it is about tug boats and their crews that seems to catch the popular imagination, but the minute Kent let slip the bit about being an engineer on a tugboat the bloke seemed to make up his mind that he was going to go out of his way to help us out of our spot of bother.

Kent: "Any chance of getting 'em done by tomorrer sometime?"

The bloke (after a bit of a silence): "Ah...mmmm. Yeah, I think that should be OK. Gerry should be finished on that job over there soon after lunch. Yeah, we can do 'em by tomorrer."

"Oh. Onya.... Thanks for that. ... (Even longer silence while Kent works out the best way to approach the next bit.) So we'll come by about ten tomorrow morning, then?"

Talk about chutzpah! "Shit! That's stretching the friendship a bit!" I thought, but the young bloke just gave a bit of a smile as though he quite admired Kent's front and replied:

"Well it wouldn't do you much good if you came any earlier, put it that way!"

While all these negotiations are going on I'm still haunted by the prospect of maybe having to shell out another two and half grand to refloat what was coming to look like an increasingly blighted enterprise, so I oh-so-casually asked: "And what sort of dough are we talking, for all this then?" I could feel my Bank-card melting.

"Aw...yer lookin' at a thousand, I'd say..."

"Oh well," I thought to myself, "at least that's a bit cheaper than the \$1250 that the Newcastle mob wanted."

"...that's for both of 'em." He added.

I tried not to look too jubilant. Bloody ripper! Doing your polypipe buying in the heart of Big Irrigation Country certainly saved you money.

“Fair enough,” I said nonchalantly, “can I pay for that with plastic?”

“Yep. No probs.”

On the way back we called in at the caravan park at Cobram where Kent had left the Range Rover, and arranged with the proprietor for us to pick up Keith-next-door’s trailer the next morning to take to Finley to bring the pontoons back on. (I tell you, the logistical challenges of these few days almost required a Critical Path diagram to deal with them). And we were back to Lo and the raft by lunchtime.

We’d brought the Rangie back from Cobram because it was heaps heavier and sturdier than the X-Trail, and would be a better proposition for getting the raft out of the river and back up onto the trailer. As is clear from the accompanying photos, there were times during this operation when it didn’t look like we were going to be able to get it back on, but somehow we did in the end. I think it took us about an hour and a half. We drove it up onto the flat under some trees and spent that night on land.



The next morning we picked up Keith’s trailer from Cobram, and it was five minutes past ten as we drove up to the big brown shed at Finley. Our two pontoons were on the ground outside the big doorway, and the ends where they’d welded the caps on were still warm to the touch. I went in to pay, and the young bloke spent a considerable amount of time with his tongue in one corner of his mouth as he worked out what to charge so that when GST was added it all came to the agreed price of a thousand bucks. There was something touching in his determination to get it exactly to the cent. By the time I got back outside the pontoons were on the trailer and Kent was just finishing off tying them down.

On our way back through Cobram (again) we stopped at a hardware store and bought what looked like a stupendous quantity of polyprop rope to lash the pontoons onto the outriggers with, and once again we were back at the riverside camp and caretaker Lorraine just before lunch.



We'd taken the clapped-out cat hulls off the outriggers the previous afternoon, so it wasn't much trouble to lash the pontoons in their place. (More precisely, it wasn't much trouble for Lo and I to watch while Kent lashed them on. My osteo-plagued fingers wouldn't have been able to get the lashing tight enough.) By about 3 o'clock in the afternoon we were backing it all back down to the river, and the re-launching was achieved with relative ease. By passing the cable from the trailer winch around a roller (that Kent, with admirable foresight, had left on the trailer for just such a purpose) before fastening the cable to the raft, we were able to winch the raft off the trailer into deep enough water to float it



OK with a bit of encouragement from all of us. As we went further down the Murray in the days to come we realised how fortunate we'd been to get into difficulties just a bit upstream of such an ideal spot to carry out our running repairs.

*I really enjoyed the couple of spells I had there on the riverbank by myself. There were the inevitable chores to be done while the boys were doing the Blue Jobs – washing up, making beds, and tidying the raft. Then get a bucket or two of water from the river and wash some clothes, and hang them up on a line rigged be-*

*tween a couple of trees. Then I could go for a wander along the river bank and look at whatever interesting things I might see. Listen to the birds. Watch the pelicans and cormorants feeding. Admire the beauty and majesty of the river gums. Take a few photos. All in all it was very peaceful and tranquil.*

*Later on the first day we were there, a car and caravan came by and went up to the far end of the reach we were on – they were just out of our sight over a ridge, a few hundred metres away. A while later a second one joined them, stopping to ask me if their friends had come by. We had a bit of a chat and I explained our predicament. The next morning after Bill and Kent had headed back into*

*Cobram I was taking some photographs, and another car bowled in, and parked right nearby. I was a bit miffed – there was plenty of space around, and she didn't need to park almost on top of us! Then she came up to me and asked how long we were planning on staying! It depends when we can get the raft back in the water, I explained. It turned out she was doing a recce for a group of women who were planning to spend the weekend there, and they always liked to camp in the spot where we had the raft. Apparently there are about 18 of them who always go away together the weekend after the Melbourne Cup, and camp out here, away from husbands and kids. I assured her we would be well gone by the weekend.*

*As we were preparing to relaunch the raft a bloke from the caravan group wandered by, and saw what we doing. He returned to their camp, and a few minutes later all four of the people from the caravans wandered down, with deck chairs under their arms, and set themselves up on the beach to watch the entertainment. As it happened, everything went so smoothly they were probably a bit disappointed.*

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So we were back in the water. It was almost exactly 48 hours since we'd been shipwrecked. Kent chucked the bowline to Lo who was standing on the front deck and yelled "OK. Take it for a burn around the block!". I went down to the stern and started the motor and we toolled around the river for a bit. After the fore/aft paranoia of the cat hulls it was absolute bliss. Both of us could get down the one end and hang out as far as we could reach and it hardly made the slightest difference to how it sat in the water. Jesus! Was it stable! It was just like a floating platform, and it didn't matter where either of us went on it, it didn't

make a scrap of difference. Talk about a success! It was what we should have had all along.

And here's where logistical fine-tuning comes into its own again. Any chance of Kent coming to Cobram on the raft was now out of the question because of the down time in getting the hulls replaced and getting back into the water again. He was going to have to head off that evening. We left Lo to be Raft Caretaker yet again, and Kent tied the old fibreglass hulls onto the light trailer and set off to take them to the Cobram tip (it was, of course, clearly marked on one of Lo's many maps). I hitched the raft trailer to the X-Trail and took off for Cobram township to another caravan park on the highway that had agreed over the phone to store the car and trailer for a very reasonable fee while we were going downstream – there was no point taking it all the way back to Yarrawonga. (We got the caravan park phone number and address from one of Lo's many pamphlets, of course.) I couldn't use the bloke Kent had patronised as it was too far to walk to his place from the bus stop. (We were able to establish this from bus timetable pamphlets that Lo had picked up at Echuca on our reconnaissance trip. I tell you, it was like having a travelling library on board). I backed the outfit into the space they showed me, and as I walked down the drive and out the front gate the red Rangie, fresh from the tip, was turning off the highway to pick me up and take me back to the raft. And we hadn't even synchronised our watches!

Kent was still a bit concerned to make sure that everything was working OK before he left us, so we got out the locality maps again from Lo's hoard, and decided that he would drive to a place called Zanetti's Beach several kilometres through the red gum forest downstream, and meet up with us there to make sure there were no problems after we'd done the corresponding stretch of river. It took us about twenty minutes to get there by river. We had to negotiate a couple of patches of snags, but with the help of the detailed river charts we were able to do this without any hassle. The raft was handling alright, but the outboard motor control arm was quite low down and it seemed easier to steer it with your legs, which worked OK while you were out in the middle with plenty of room and didn't need to indulge in fancy snag-avoiding manoeuvres. To change the throttle setting you had to bend down, and neither of us is very good at that these days, but compared to its earlier shortcomings the raft felt like a Murray Maserati.

*It was on this stretch that I first had a go at the helm, so to speak. Until then, with two blokes on board, my role was primarily in the galley. But now I had a bit of a chance to take the tiller, and wind our way through some snags, and then bring her round into the current at just the right speed to sidle against the bank. So I got a bit of practice at steering. But I had not had any practice at changing into gear, reversing, or seriously manoeuvring the craft. I hadn't really got to know the motor at all – I still wasn't even sure where all the controls were, as one had to get right down to work them all out, and it was hard enough for me to bend halfway down!*

As we approached Zanetti's Beach the Rangie was just appearing from a rough track out of the bush. We swung up into the current and made landfall not far from where he'd stopped, and chucked out the sand anchor to hold us while we made our farewells. It was so good to be able to sidle in to the bank so that we were lying lengthways alongside, and know that we had pontoons tough enough that we didn't have to worry about tree roots or sticky-out things that might punch a hole in us.

By now it's getting towards dusk and we had yet to find a place to tie up for the night, so we said goodbye to Kent, Lo started up the motor, whacked it into

reverse, and gunned us away from the shore out into the main run of the river. The river was considerably narrower on this stretch, and suddenly we were being swept along by the current alarmingly fast. It was about 150 metres down to the next bend, and as we approached it it looked like it was wall-to-wall snags – right across. I grabbed the boat hook and ran towards the bow to be ready to fend us off should we miscalculate threading our way through.

“I can’t get the motor into forward gear!” Lorraine yelled out as I took up my position on the front deck. The snags were getting closer.

“Come and fend us off and I’ll have a go” I yelled, hurtling back towards the stern. The snags were perilously close by this. The gear lever was recalcitrant. We had no power and no steering control. I slammed the lever into reverse and revved the motor till it screamed but it didn’t seem to make any noticeable difference.

We were right in amongst all the snags well and truly now. Every time I tried to get the motor into gear I had to bend down, so that for seconds at a time I couldn’t see where we were heading. Lorraine was yelling instructions to me but I couldn’t hear her over the roar of the motor. It was just bedlam. I caught a glimpse of Kent back in the distance, watching our progress – presumably with some alarm. Then the whole raft lurched as we bounced off a snag just under the water that we had no show of seeing coming. I went to the edge of the back deck to peer along the side of the raft to see if I could get a better view of what was happening, just in time to see us ram broadside on into this fucking huge branch about 150mm in diameter that was just out of the water. Thunk! The raft lurched again, almost stopped, then the current swivelled it around on the branch and as we continued on down the river the jagged end of the branch was raked right down the outside of the pontoon. It skidded along it until it hit and caught on the rope which lashed the pontoon to the middle outrigger. I watched in dismay as the whole aluminium outrigger arm was moved towards the stern by the force of the impact. It brought the raft to a halt, again, and then as we slowly pivoted on this fulcrum the snag let us go and we took off again sideways on to the current. The outrigger arm was now at an angle of some 45 degrees to the main body of the raft and the welds around the top, bottom and one side had been simply ripped asunder. It was hanging on by the weld down one side, but it was still attached and appeared to be still doing its job.

By now we’d blundered and bounced our way through most of the area mined with snags, and after a fend off here and a bit of a bump there we were back into open water again. We waved to Kent, hoping he would take that to mean that we were OK, and we saw him get into the car and drive back into the redgums. “I’ll bet he’s glad to be shot of us,” I said to Lo as she took the controls again, and we collected our scattered wits. “What a pathetic pair of silly old farts he must think we are.”

Of course, now that we weren’t at panic stations any more the motor obediently went into forward gear and suddenly everything was back to normal as we cruised off down the river again, but as things turned out later we had not heard the last of the motor’s sporadic intransigence.

It was distinctly dusk by this, and as we rounded the next bend we found ourselves coming up to a low shoreline fringed with long grass. We decided to call it another adventurous day and turned up into the current and made fast fore and aft to a couple of perfectly-spaced trees. It was only a matter of taking one step on the shoreside pontoon and you could step off onto the grassy bank without even risking getting your feet wet. It was time for a piss, a glass of wine

and a cone while we mulled over the events of the day.

As the light faded we could see another low storm cloud working its way towards us from the southwest, and by the time we had finished eating it was raining again in earnest. We could hardly hear ourselves talk through the noise of the rain on the roof, but that didn't stop me complaining. A couple more reds and I was into full whingeing mode.

"Well, you have to admit that bugger-all's gone right so far. Even before The Big Impaling we had nothing but problems. The computer won't charge up from the battery like it did when we tested it at Dora Creek, so we can't download or process any of our digiphotos, and we don't know how to fix it. We had to replace the bloody stove that had also worked fine during the trials, the mobile phone is never within service range, the car-kit booster that was supposed to extend our mobile range did fuck-all, and..."

Lorraine cut me short. "But we're here, on top of the water. Intact and floating. And we've just had a nice meal. We're on the Murray at last, and everything is looking good to get on with what we've been dreaming about for more than two years." (She's a mine of commonsense and a gentle antidote when I'm holding forth with a bleak view of things, bless 'er.) "Why not look on it as a test of the pontoons, and feel pleased that they came through so well? Just imagine what it would have been like if we'd still had the cat hulls on! We'd still be upriver hung up on a snag. As it is we haven't done any serious damage, and I think we should be celebrating having come through all this, not wallowing in whinge mode" She was right, as usual. We got ready for bed, climbed in, and tried to ignore the thundering of the rain on the roof as we settled down to go to sleep.

