

mountain bike kayak raft trek navigate climb teamwork

## Hardtales in the wild


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### XPD Whitsunday Coast

August 2007

Our team comprised Brett Sparkes, Kevin Humphrey, Kath Copland and Greg Bacon. Luckily we all knew one another and they were not expecting the world of me at such short notice, they just wanted to get there as a full team and see what happened after that.

The event started under a cloud with the death of John Harvey from the organizing team while driving to the event. There were 57 teams ready to go, down on the original numbers, but it is difficult keeping teams together for events like these. There were no mandatory checks due to the accident and delays in finalizing the event, which gave us a bit more time to relax. We set up our sails on the kayaks and went for a test ride in the afternoon which was fun. At the race briefing only part of the course was given out which meant we had to make a few assumptions on what to pack in our trunks, as long as there was food and a few clothes we should be right.



#### LEG 1: KAYAK/TREK/SNORKEL (30 TO 50K)

This leg was a rogaine to various islands, beaches, hilltops and coral reefs. We could elect to drop some CPs to make sure that we could get around the course before the 6.00pm cut off for the ocean paddle. We opted to drop CP A which, at the most, would give us a 1 hour penalty to be served at the end of the second paddle on day 2. This was a great days racing as teams continually crossed paths depending on how they tackled the course. The trek/run to the high points on the islands were spectacular, the time seemed to flash by. Our paddling was solid throughout the day and we moved through the course catching the tide and wind in the right direction most times. We completed the first snorkel CP of around 300m but we decided to drop the two CP/snorkel sections at the far end of the course. This worked in our favour as it was a hot and windy day and a few less hours spent on the water could work well for us later. We arrived at Airlie Beach around 4.00pm, with around 12 teams ahead of us; the top teams were still on the water as they were going for all the CPs. At the most we had two hours in penalties but we figured that most teams would have at least 1 hour in penalties and it was early days in the race. We had a quick transition, including washing down under a tap on the beach then it was off on the trek leg.



#### LEG 2: TREK 30K THE GREAT WHITSUNDAY WALK

We quickly found the start of the walking track and it was then a solid climb up the mountain range from Airlie Beach. I was still wearing my rash shirt and started to melt down during the climb. I stripped off to just wear the race bib and the team took some of the gear out of my pack, all good again! Several of the top teams ran passed us on the trek but we stuck to our plan of only walking at a solid pace. We had time to check out a huge python hanging from a tree at the side of the track. We walked for the last hour of the trek with a number of teams. It was late evening when we reached the TA for the bike leg north.



### LEG 3: MTB 47K TO NORTH WHITSUNDAYS

This was a straight forward leg mainly on sealed roads with a little gravel in between. We stayed with a team from the US for most of this leg. We all tried to surge and leave the other team behind but they hung on and even paid us back mid way through the ride. It kept us entertained and once again this leg passed quickly. Kathy had no problems navigating on this section and we all felt well as we hit the TA at Dingo Beach in the early hours of the morning. We had to wait till 6.00am at the TA before we could go onto the water. New maps and info were also given out on our arrival. Our bike boxes had not arrived so we could not pack our bikes away plus our sleeping gear was in the bike box. We decided to have some food and sleep with what we had then get up early to put the bikes away and prepare the kayaks. We could not touch the kayaks or paddle gear until 5.00am. We all crashed, Brett woke us at around 5.am so we quickly packed away the bikes and started to prepare the kayaks for the start of day 2. Teams were still coming in well after us, which meant that they had no sleep or got onto the water late. The top ten teams were now well rested and ready for the next ocean paddle. We were a little slow in getting going and we hit the water around 15min after the 6.00am start time. By now we were the 12<sup>th</sup> team to leave the TA.

### LEG 4: 43 K OCEAN PADDLE/SNORKEL/COASTEERING

For us this leg was critical as we had to make the most of the tides and winds to obtain all the CPs as we were told that the penalties were going to be a lot heavier on this leg. We had to do each CP in order and we kept the lead teams in sight for a few hours as we crossed from island to island. We were only 30 min behind the lead teams as we crossed over on the 3k coasteering leg on one island. The first snorkel CP was relatively easy but with the run out tide it was a little shallow, I got a few coral cuts on my knee which got angry over the next few days. We had one down wind leg to the final snorkel CP. This was an issue as the kayaks were difficult to steer with the wind and waves moving us from side to side. There were several boats around us and we all seemed to be making slow progress. We made the landing point for the last snorkel, then had to cross the island to the snorkel area, it was getting crowded now as kayaks were coming from all directions as this was the last CP before the 14k crossing to the mainland. Once again the wind and tide was in our favour, even though we took a few hours to reach Bowen we were still paddling solidly.

I think we made it to the end of the paddle around 4.00pm. After 10 hours full on paddling/trekking and snorkeling we were ready for our two hour penalty time at the TA plus a little extra to get us through the next section. We were packed up ready to go fairly quickly, including another wash under a tap. Kath had difficulty sleeping, as she had a bad cough, Brett had a sleep while I helped Kevin contact the maps for the next section. Kevin always had less sleep than the rest of us as he did all the maps as they were handed out.

Spending the extra hour or two meant that we were now towards the end of the field, but we banked on the extra rest/time out from racing helping us later that night. We left the TA mid evening but we found a take away first and spent 30 minutes getting egg and bacon rolls and iced coffee to see us through the night.

### LEG 5: MTB 105 K TO THE OUTBACK

The first hour was straight forward and we did not see any teams, we found the first CP in the river bed just as another team came to it from the wrong direction, they had missed it and were on their way back. The maps were 1:100000 scale, 30 odd years old with contours up to 40m, I am glad I was not doing the Nav, the maps were way too small for me, let alone working on

them at night while riding. As the hours ticked over we started to pass team after team, some just stopped, some asleep and many lost. As we got into the hilly bush/off track sections it was very difficult keeping to the tracks or the right fence line to make our way around the course. At one stage we passed four teams in a conga line in the tight stuff, we were now pumped and Kathy managed to steer us through all the teams, bike tracks heading in the wrong direction and the rough tracks at a hectic pace. We spent some time looking for a way out of the most challenging area, as we found the exit points other teams saw us and followed straight away. Bummer! We kept to our plan of stopping every two or so hours for a quick bite to eat and a rest, I managed to shut my eyes each time and have a good 5min sleep.



During the night I hit a log in long grass and went over the handlebars, no damage, Kevin did the same but landed a little harder on his knee, this would catch up with him later when the swelling got worse. We found the power line just on dawn which we had to follow into the TA. This part of the ride was great as it was undulating and a challenging track which you could go fast on as long as you kept up the concentration.

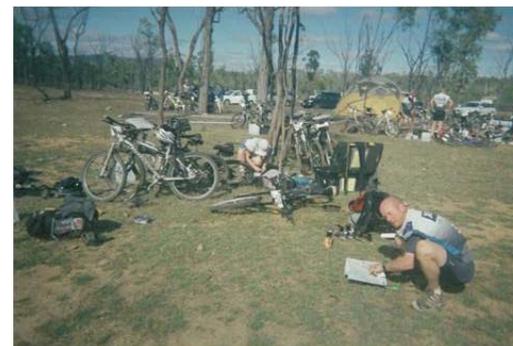


We were with a number of teams on the last section which once again made the time go quickly, we had two flats on the way, not as bad as the US team we lent patches to, as they had around 20 punctures by the time we met them, they must have been doing something wrong or going too hard for the conditions.

To our surprise we arrived at the TA in 8<sup>th</sup> place, having passed nearly 30 teams during the night. We were on a high and we spent little time putting on our trekking gear and heading off on a 35k rogaine.

#### **LEG 6: TREK/ROGAINE 35K THE MAKE OR BREAK LEG**

Teams had to pick up 11 of 13 CPs around the course. The CPs were a few k apart and either on very rough and gnarly hills and knolls or in tricky creek beds. It was going to be a long day, the lead teams had been out on the course for around 8hrs before we started and they estimated it would take from 12 to 16 hours. It was a very hot and humid day as we tackled the CPs in the larger hilly area first, our aim was to use the spurs up the mountains and contour around, we could see other teams going straight up and we all seemed to meet at the same time, it was slow going due to the steepness of the hills and the long grass and rocks underfoot. This was going to take a long time to get through! We ran into one team twice that was dropping their teammates off well away from the CP while one member went to the CP. We managed to get through the hilly stuff by mid afternoon then set off to the Cps that seemed to be miles away. Kevin's nav was spot on each time and we had collected seven Cps as darkness fell. Luckily it was a full moon and features were easy to make out. The CP in the watercourse was amazing as we were mainly boulder/rock hopping down the watercourse, glad we were going downhill with plenty of water in this section of the course. We met up with a few teams in the watercourse. The Cp located on a knoll at the side of the watercourse proved difficult to a number of teams. As we left the watercourse we turned off our lights as it made it easier to pick out the features and made it harder for teams to follow us. This worked well for us as the team that was with us took over two hours to find the CP. It was now the early hours of the morning of day 3 and we had not slept or rested for over 30hours, sleepmonsters were fast approaching. Kevin decided to skip the last CP that we had planned to do as it was up another hill and to trek around 6k to the other side of the course to pick up our last CP. It was amazing as Kevin set off on a compass bearing, moving around knolls and gullies with three half asleep team mates in tow. Over an hour later we were bang on the CP. It was now back to the TA, we had to go around the out of bounds area which added more time, not sure what time we got in but we were now in 7<sup>th</sup> place after 14 hours of solid trekking, once again we could not believe that we were still keeping up with the pointy end of the field. We were all knackered and went straight to sleep, I think we had around two hours, we got a little cold under the space blankets, many teams were starting to come in and the campfire proved a popular area to sit or sleep. We got up at daybreak, had a





good feed and readied ourselves for the big ride. Some of the teams that had not completed the rogaine had already left. We knew that if we could just keep moving steadily and the fact that we had cleared both the last kayak leg and the rogaine meant that we were holding a solid position near the front of the field. Lack of sleep was becoming a bit of an issue and Kathy and I had not been eating a lot, we needed a shop and real food!

#### **LEG 7: MTB 145K (WE ACTUALLY RODE 184K ) TO MID CAMP**

Once again it was a hot day and we were heading into a headwind, the first half of the ride was on bitumen and major gravel roads over undulating outback Qld. We stopped off for pies and buns at Collinsville which gave us a little more fuel for the ride ahead. Things were going well, until we missed the turnoff at the Bowen River, I think I distracted everyone as I was pointing at a Croc in jest. We went 10k past the turnoff before we realized the error then decided on a shortcut. Big mistake! The road was there but had been realigned and we started heading away from the river and the road we needed. To top it off the clay was covered in concrete like holes from cattle footprints and we made slow progress. We cut across the paddocks and finally made it back on track, it took us over an hour out of our way and we once again passed teams that we had passed well over an hour previously. We stopped off and filled up with water on the Bowen River. My teammates kept watch for crocs while I was on the riverbank. You never know! We had plenty of stops along the way, wetting our clothes in a dam and stripping off in some rock pools along the way. Once again we stuck to our stops every 2 hours just to break the ride. Only the French team passed us on this ride, they were really pushing hard when they passed us. I dropped a chain link which was fixed in good time. We arrived at the mountain range just on dark and it was now time for the first hike a bike. I think it took us over an hour for the climb, we probably could have rode up but just to walk for a while was heaven. We could see several teams still down in the valley as the lights slowly closed on the mountain range. The ride over the top was great, rolling hills and at least we were out off granny gear. We picked up the CP near Eungella Dam late that evening but now it was all hills and we were tiring after the long days ride.



It was not long before lack of sleep caught up with me again, I was pedaling so slowly up the hills that I was losing my balance. We started to walk a few hills after this. Every time we stopped I crashed for a few minutes, I was also suffering stomach cramps and I had not been eating for a while. We were all doing it tough now and we just could not make that extra effort to get to mid camp and have a sleep. I am sure that all the other teams were in the same boat. After what seemed like hours of agony we finally made it to mid camp in the early hours of the morning on Day 4.



#### **MID CAMP MANDATORY 6 HOUR REST AND HOT MEAL**

When we checked in at the TA, I apparently tried to walk off with the list of time penalties that had been applied throughout the course. I was muttering things like, "We don't have any penalties" etc etc, I was too tired to even read the notice let alone remember what I had done. The teams were issued with 5 man tents at the TA. I still was not up to a meal so Brett rigged another tent for me. I set up my bed and went straight to sleep. While I was out to it the team did the rest of the maps etc for the next leg, had a hot meal and shower then they too had some sleep. I think I had around 4 hours sleep, Brett stuck his head in the tent just on dawn and asked me if I was right to get going again, I'm good! Off to pack the bike away, change for the trek then Kathy and I had a great hot breakfast. Thanks to the volunteer team at Midcamp they were life savers. I actually felt great after a solid sleep and decent food and we were over halfway. We started off on the trek leg in around 13<sup>th</sup> place.

## LEG 8: TREK 21K MACKAY HIGHLAND GREAT WALK

This was a great reviver, beautiful rainforest and an easy walking trail with a few CPs thrown in, we plodded past a few teams while one team jogged past us, some teams were still keen! We had lightened our packs as we did not need too much food or water and it was a very relaxing start to the back half of the course. We arrived at the bike TA after around 4hrs with a couple of teams in the TA and a few close behind.

## LEG 9: MTB 76 K ALL OFF ROAD/GREAT DOWNHILLS

My wife Kerry made the long trip to the TA and arrived just as we did, it was great to see her again as she gave our team a big cheer, we did not stay long as we wanted to maintain our momentum. It was a long climb out of the TA, we made a small error shortly after the start and we had two teams pass us while we were getting back on track. After the climb it was a great ride, undulating and some gnarly down hills. We went fairly hard on this leg with Kathy leading the way, we passed one team lying on the side of the road and they asked us if we ever sleep? No, back into it. I think one of their team members had a spill which was why they were resting. The end of the ride was really quick with a well graded road and plenty of down hills. We were coming out of the mountains onto the plains which made this a fun ride. We hit the bitumen just on dark and rode through the cane fields for around an hour then into the TA for the last kayak leg, we were all feeling OK but decided to have a sleep at the TA before taking on the kayaks at night. We found that the lack of sleep on the previous days was catching up to us and we could no longer go for over a day without some sleep.



## 10 KAYAK 22K PIONEER RIVER (WHITE WATER AND TWO PORTAGES)

Kevin and Kath had a hot meal and went off for a sleep while Brett and I pumped up two kayaks and got all the seating and gear ready. We carried the kayaks down the track to the river then set them up as beds just off the track. Very comfy sleep wrapped up in the space blanket inside the kayaks. We all got up just before midnight, checked out of the TA then onto the water. A number of teams had passed us while we were asleep but we just stuck to our game plan, no panicking and just tackle things one leg at a time.



The first part of the paddle went quickly as we came up to the first weir in the early hours of the morning. I was a little tense as we edged right up to the 4m drop at the weir then quickly hopped out onto the concrete steps for our portage. There were two teams at the first weir, asleep somewhere and we could see the lights of another team doing the portage. We all had our jackets on but as soon as we stopped moving I got cold. We carried the kayaks up to the top of the weir area then headed off to find a good entry point. We decided on a short portage in front of the weir and about 200m along the rocky banks. It took around an hour to move the kayaks as we took it slowly on the rough and steep ground. Our entry point put us in at the start of the white water. At least with the moonlight we could pick out the gaps and just tried pot luck in getting through. The rapids were fairly tame and shallow in places, 50% of the time I had to hop out and push the kayak over the rocks and trees, I was wet but as we kept moving the cold did not effect me.

Once out of the rapids it was a slow, boring and sleepy paddle in the early hours of the morning. Brett and Kath were singing along in their boats while Kevin and I kept nodding off. Team Mawson was in front of us and they said they had the same problem trying to keep awake. We reached the last weir just on daylight and waited for Mawson to exit the water. When they had started their portage we then got ashore and started our portage. Just as I was unloading gear a Kiwi team came flying into the bank, jumped out, heaved my boat further up the bank then jumped in front of us in a flash. Within 5 min they were gone! I think they were trying to make up lost ground. More white water after the weir which was once again fairly tame, then a short paddle to the exit point on the river. We had taken around 6 hrs for the paddle, but we took our time on the portages to make sure we did not damage ourselves or the kayaks. Once again it had been a fun leg with plenty of variety and a little white water action at night thrown in. Another short portage to the TA then it was back onto the bikes. There were a couple of teams in the TA, I think we were still in around 13<sup>th</sup> place at this stage.

## LEG 11: MTB 91K RIDE AROUND THE PLAINS



This was to be a relatively flat ride through cane country, the first point of call was the local take away on our way out of the TA. I filled up with fresh sandwiches and milk and refused to move until I had eaten them. It is amazing how real food can give you hours of energy. Once again we took time off every two hours to cool off, snooze or eat. We found one more shop on the way for an ice cream stop. Our plan for this leg was to get to the trek TA before dark, eat, sleep then tackle the easy part of the trek during the night, we were not in a hurry at this stage. We had time to stop and move a python off the road before it got squashed.

This was a fairly easy ride. One unranked team passed us on this leg. Once again Kathy got us through the leg with a minimum of fuss, I think we ended up riding around 105K on this leg arriving at the TA at about 4.30pm still in around 13<sup>th</sup> place, hot food, changed into trekking gear, set up the sleeping gear and have a solid sleep. We spent around 5 hours in the TA. We slept well away from the TA so we would not be disturbed. It was definitely a lot better sleep during the warmer hours of the night, nothing worse than waking up shivering under a space blanket. The TA officials could not find us while we were sleeping to give us a change to the trek leg. We headed off around 9.30pm for the big trek. Two teams had passed us while we were asleep.

#### **LEG 12: TREK 90K BIG CLIMB/BIG WATERCOURSE/TOUGH NAV**

The trek had been shortened with the CP after the manned checkpoint being deleted, only the first three teams completed this CP, it was shortened due to the time it was taking to gain the CP. We set off on the steady road climb up the mountain. We caught up to the Canadian team after about two hours. They were walking all over the road and singing along with their MP3 players. They did not hear us come up to them and they jumped when we clapped their singing. We tried to pass them but their team leader kept with us and dragged their team along, we were setting a good pace and having a good chat for an hour or two. Unfortunately we missed the CP on the high point near the road by about 3k and had to turn back, we were all pretty cross for missing it. When we arrived at the CP we ran into two teams that had been searching for the CP for an hour, the CP was further off the road than described on the CP description. We dropped off the Canadian team as they stopped for a sleep then headed for the watercourse that would take us off the mountain into the tricky stuff. We followed one team into the watercourse but lost sight of them quickly, we had been in the watercourse for around an hour when two teams came up on us moving at a frantic pace. We decided to hop onto the conga line once again. All was going well until a member of Team Mawson twisted his ankle, Kath checked out the ankle then we were off again this time following Herculean down the watercourse. We came to the major turn and drop off in the watercourse just on daylight, another magic moment as we had a rest and the team navigators discussed the best option for finding the dreaded CP 34.1.

Thor from Herculean and Kevin decided to climb up a spur behind us and have a look at the terrain. When we reached the top in full sunlight you could clearly see the interconnecting spurs, knolls and saddles that would take us to the top for the CP. I do not think that many teams would have seen this option especially if they were doing this section at night.

The 6 odd k traverse around the mountain side was great, easy grade, open and grassy, the spurs were like a highway to the CP and Thor out the front was moving really fast. We were half way along the route when we caught up to R&R Dunedin who had been sitting on a knoll decidedly unsure of their location, they had left some 6 hours before us, there were now three teams on their way to the CP. We did the traverse in around 90 minutes, got to the top of the mountain and quickly headed off for the CP. Just as we reached the CP Team Pigs might Fly



came up to the CP from the steeper way from the valley below, they had left 12 hours before us, we were pumped and Thor was over the moon for leading us up the mountain by such an easy route. This was probably my biggest buzz for the event, to be sitting on top of the mountain with four other teams all jockeying for the top 10 placings was a real accomplishment. Unfortunately for us some of the teams were well rested and we knew that they would take off as soon as we got off the hill. Another conga line down the mountain, a little slower as it was fairly steep then into the watercourse and the flat section of the course. We were by ourselves once again as the other teams cleared out. We punched the CP in the watercourse then it was off on the long cross country nav to the manned CP. Apparently some teams had difficulty on this leg, the map did not show much detail but we just took a compass bearing and two hours later bang on the CP. It was good to see the smiling faces of the CP volunteers, some had been there for days waiting for us and they still had a few days to go. We now had to face a 30k slog along the road to the bike TA; this was hard on the feet as our pace slowed. Kevin's knee was swelling badly after his bike fall and we were once again in need of some sleep. We kept up our stops every two hours with one Kiwi team motoring past us on this leg. We finally made it to the last TA at around 8.30pm. It was only a 4 hour or so bike ride to the finish line but Kevin and Kathy needed some sleep. They both curled up in their sleeping bags for over an hour's solid sleep, Brett and I were just dozing off when the rain came down and we quickly had to pack up our gear which was lying around. No sleep. Another bummer! We left the TA after about 2 hours with at least three teams over two hours ahead and one all male team in the TA with us.

We were a little deflated as our pace slowed over the back part of the course but lack of sleep and exhaustion was catching up with us, that's AR!

### LEG 13: MTB 60K TO AIRLIE BEACH

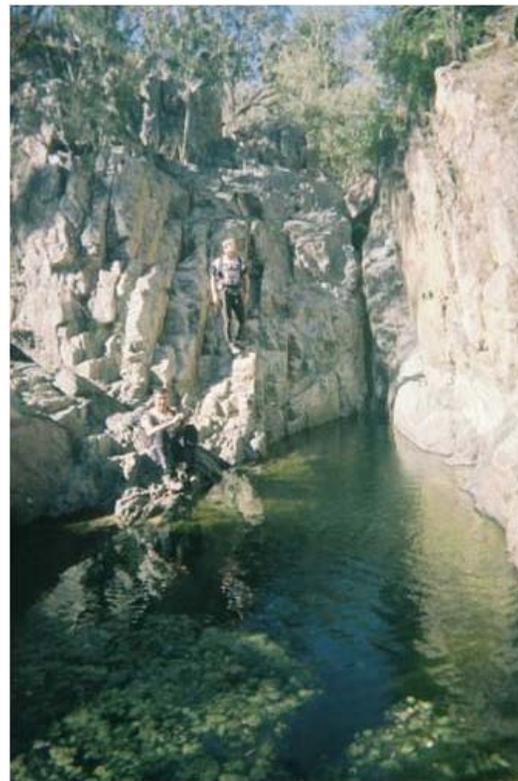
We had only been riding for around 30 min when we ran into three teams lost in the maze of cane fields and thick scrub. The map showed a penciled in line for a road to exit the fields but at night, in the rain and all the teams being tired it turned into chaos. We thought we had the route out pegged and quickly left the other teams behind, unfortunately we kept to the wrong side of a fence through the fields and ended up doing around 15k in a loop back to where we started. I was pretty knackered by now as we had been really pegging it through the fields. We came back to where we started and by now all the other teams had long gone, we found two dams that were marked on the map then hiked through the scrub on a northerly bearing. We came out on the track that we went wrong on the first time, this time we saw a gap in the fence that all the bikes had gone through then we were off again. Now on the right track, we kept up the pace for around an hour but Brett and I were nodding off on the bike and riding on the wrong side of the road all the time, it was a real battle trying to keep awake as we both kept thinking that we had done it all before and we were totally lost. Luckily Kathy was on the ball and kept us pointing in the right direction. I could not for the life of me understand why we had to go to Strathdickie to pick up the last CP when the sign said Airlie Beach the other way. I vaguely remember standing in the middle of the road as the rest of the team searched for the last CP fixed to the bus stand post, and then it was off again to Airlie Beach. Airlie Beach is very quiet at around 3.00am. As we got to the town area the rain bucketed down on us. At least it kept us awake. We were now racing flat out in the rain through the main street of Airlie Beach, where was all the cheering crowds?

WE HAD MADE IT! There were still a few teams that had just finished in front of us but it was off to the lounge area for a beer, pizza and ice cream, just what the doctor ordered!

### BITS AND PIECES

#### A FEW STATS

We finished the race in 10<sup>th</sup> place outright in just under 7 days and around 9 hours behind the 5<sup>th</sup> place team that we met at CP34.1 on the last trek, we were one of only eleven teams that had no penalties from missed CPs. We were ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in the trekking and we did not run on any of the treks after day 1, we were ranked 12<sup>th</sup> on the MTB and the 5<sup>th</sup> fastest MTB leg to the rogain (Kathy nailed it) we were ranked 21<sup>st</sup> in the kayak but many teams cut the second day short and missed CPs which gave them faster times. We spent 36 hours in the TA but we used



Blue = Kayak / Green =Trek / Orange =MTB

this for our sleeping time and usually in a bit of comfort. We completed 95k in the kayaks plus snorkeling, 190k trekking and 595k on the MTB, we did a few extra k here and there, that's a total of around 880k, reading this it is hard to believe, but it was just great fun!

### THE COURSE

Challenging navigation with little maps, great ocean paddling and views from the top of the islands, spectacular rainforests and plenty of wild life, some fantastic downhill MTB sections and good all round riding, hot at times, just made it between water top ups, some great food at local take-aways! Really demanding trekking in areas no one in their right mind would visit, awesome water courses with fun boulder hopping sections, Thanks Craig, Louise and team, the courses just keep getting better.

### MY TEAM

Thanks Brett, Kathy and Kevin for taking me along for the ride, I will always remember Kathy's bike nav on Leg 5 through the night, what a buzz! Kevin's nav in the rogaine was from another planet, I still don't know how someone can go cross country at night for over 5k, half asleep and end up bang on the mark. Brett the team leader always keeping things together and keeping an eye on the Nav. Thanks for looking after me and lightening the load when I needed it, Its All Good is a top AR team and good friends to match.

### MY HIGHLIGHT

My best image of XPD Whitsunday's was following Team Herculean led by Thorlene Egerton to CP 34.1 and sitting at the CP with three other teams with only around 15 hours ahead of us to reach the finish line.

### THE RACE ORGANISERS

After such a sad beginning to the event what better way to finish up with only great memories of a great race. The course and format which allowed teams to drop CPs without being unranked makes the goal of finishing XPD very obtainable, there are some great stories out there and I hope that other teams take the time to share their story!

Thanks Craig, Louise and the team and volunteers for such a fantastic event, if I am not racing I would certainly love to help out at the next XPD in the High Country.

*Pa Egg*

