

Paddling from the Darkness



A group of NSW Correctional Officers has completed the journey from Walgett to Bourke on the Namoi, Barwon and Darling Rivers to raise awareness of PTSD, Depression and Anxiety amongst Correctional Officers and their families.

They want the stigma of mental illness to be addressed and removed and treated like all other workplace and lifestyle issues, not forgotten about or ignored. *"It's OK to stick your hand up and ask for help"*, is the message they want to get out there. *"You are not alone"*.

Casting off near Walgett on Monday August 3rd, Geoff Kelty and myself (Wayne Cole) were waved off by support crew member Greg Mohr. The river was flowing well.

As we began what was to be a 500km trip over fourteen days, we passed locals fishing, exchanged greetings and continued around the many twisting bends that define this part of the river from Walgett to Brewarrina. It didn't take long to realise that the further we paddled, the more we had to keep our minds on task and focused on the job. In the opening days we faced a few challenges that kept us on our toes. Debris and blocked rivers became familiar but luckily only once we had to do a complete portage of kayaks and equipment. Our Support Crew struggled in getting to us due to a lack of communications; we were unable to send "sat pics", so using calculations and the occasional fixed location, they needed our help as much as we needed theirs so that they could get to us with essential food and water.

We covered 40km minimum per day which kept us on track for arrival times to Brewarrina. Our morning started at 0600, when we would wake up, breakfast and break camp and be on the water by 0730. We would take a break at 10kms, 20km for lunch, 30 km and finally, 40km when we would make camp for the night. This was to be our routine for the seven days it would take to get from Walgett to Brewarrina. During the days we were confronted with a number of very thought provoking moments. On one particular occasion we could hear a strange metal sound coming from the distance. It sounded like wailing and continued for a number of kilometres. Eventually we came around a sweeping bend and saw the source of this apocalyptic sound. A broken, twisted and rusted windmill turned slowly, slowly and we laughed, relieved to finally know what the ungodly sound was. Not far from this we passed an abandoned homestead from a once strong rural era and that moment we both felt a very strong sense of isolation. We made camp that night and chatted quietly about this. Knowing that our Support Crew would get to us, we enjoyed a few extra comforts that evening for dinner.

Day 5 dawned like any other, but little did we know that at the end of that day, we would be near broken, defeated by weather, wind and the harsh realities of our location. The wind started around 0900 and blew fiercely in our faces for the entire 40km. We had been averaging 9 to 10 minute kilometres for our journey thus far, but on day 5 we managed only 14 to 16 minutes per kilometre. We messaged our support crew to request an ETA on our location as we felt this day could end our trip. That day, I personally reflected on a number of life changing matters I had witnessed within my career and strongly started taking stock of my life and the future I wanted to see. That afternoon we hit the 40km mark and immediately beached the kayaks as we were physically and mentally done. And then, a glimmer of hope. Our Support Crew contacted us and said they were in a boat, (thanks to Shane McLean!) and heading in our direction. Whilst waiting, we had tried to assemble our tents for the night as we didn't have the energy to even cook dinner. We could hear the faint sound of a motor boat and about 30 minutes later our full support crew pulled into the shore, with sandwiches, an outstanding beef stew and the smiles we so badly needed, plus conversation with good mates who we have shared so much with over our careers. As they left we waved them off and fell into food comas. It was very, very good! I look back now and to us, Day 5 was our day of reckoning. It was that crossroad, that hurdle that some in life view as a barrier. Days 6 and 7 came and went without issue. Our minds had faced the darkness and we were not going to let it take this moment from us. We powered into Brewarrina feeling as mentally fresh as the day we cast off, but to me day 5 was still the day that truly tested us.



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Brewarrina was the break we needed. Speaking with locals and taking in the sights was high on our agenda. We felt new, revitalised, very different and ready to take on the next step which was 205km from Brewarrina to Bourke and paddling on the Darling River. Geoff and I decided to cut short our break in Bre by a day to get back in the water to finish the job. We advised our Support Crew that we would be going over the weir near midday the following day.

The following day our gear was packed and we loaded up and headed off to our cast off point. Brewarrina Newspaper Editor, Lara Taylor asked us a number of questions about our journey and our careers and what it all meant to us. I do recall being asked by her, "What does the River mean to you?" I replied... Hope! Hope and life! We gave our views and feelings and it was great to see our Support Crew being quizzed as well. We loaded into our kayaks and began the next stage to Bourke. As we paddled passed the "Boomerang" a group of locals called out. *Where are you off to?* We replied, *Bourke! Are you the boys who came from Walgett?* They asked. We replied *Yes, we are. We heard you were coming,* they said and they wished us good luck! It was a great start to what would be a great section of the journey.

The river outside of Brewarrina started to open up. Very high banks lined with massive gum trees watching over us like guardians of our journey. Black Cockatoos followed us daily and the river was less twisted. Large straights started to overtake our river journey and we landed on some of the most beautiful white sand beaches to camp overnight and have lunch. At times we paddled through narrow section shaded by yet, more river gums and we passed some stunning grassy banks and thousands of wild goats. We paddled a steady 8 to 9 minute km and enjoyed the open space. Rocky sections appeared on the banks which shadowed us the entire way to Bourke. Crossing the Bogan River Junction was bliss and it was good to see a large volume of water entering the Barwon/Darling system at that point. We were now averaging 7 min kilometres, and were feeling the true power of

the river. By now Geoff and I were joking about our "Special Needs" Support Crew who were sending us photos of roaring fires, camp oven dinners and adult beverages, whilst we enjoyed our 2 minute noodles and tuna, electrolyte water and protein meals. Day 3 came and our Support Crew showed up, once again, with sandwiches, coke and a full water resupply, then a few hours later sent us pictures of themselves at the Brewarrina RSL as we crawled into our tents for another night on the river bank.

Around the middle of the following day we paddled past the Culgoa Junction and were officially on the Darling River. For me it was a bucket list moment—an extraordinary feeling. Geoff and I were focused now on getting the job done. We had put the hard days behind us and we could see the finish line! At the end of that day our Special Needs Support Crew radioed us to say they had a spot on the river and were cooking us a BBQ dinner. No sweeter words had been spoken for 2 weeks... *A BBQ!* We saw Steve on the river bank and he helped us beach our kayak and unload our gear for the night. Greg informed us we were 16km from Bourke. I nearly cried. The emotion of the whole journey was starting to hit. We had done it! That night we couldn't sleep as the excitement of the journey and being so close to the finish actually hit home.

On the final morning we broke camp and loaded up. We took a break at the 8km mark, since we only had 16kms to go. I contacted Ian Cole and looked at our location on the sat map and thought *we are closer than we think.* We set off after our break and rounded a number of sweeping bends. Suddenly, up ahead, we saw the paddle vessel the "Jandra". We were nearly there. I caught a glimpse of the top of the bridge at North Bourke and Geoff saw Ian Cole taking photographs as we approached the last bend on the Darling. Excitement was only part of the feeling. I paddled a little further down to take a picture of the bridge. Tears began to fall as I thought of the effort that had been put in and I hoped that our message about mental health was getting out there. Our Support Crew arrived with Bacon and Egg Rolls and cans of coke. These guys were like Angels, appearing when we needed support the most!

This trip has changed my life. It has showed me that you can do anything if you set your mind and body to the task. It has cleared the haze that was blocking me. The river did give me the hope that I needed and now I feel it has given me a second chance at a positive life.

- Wayne Cole

