

Caffyn Fuelled

by John Dowd

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Paul Caffyn's drive has resulted in a staggering list of sea kayaking firsts that are sadly little recognized outside his native Australia and adopted New Zealand.

Forget for the moment that Paul Caffyn is a kayaker. Just consider what he has done at sea and compare that against other individual nautical achievements of the past 1,000 years or so. His accomplishments are so far beyond the comprehension of most kayakers that we simply file it away, along with the epics of Ulysses and Frodo Baggins, as "not of this world." Certainly other adventurers, such as Slocum, Chichester, Lindeman, and Gillet, did very impressive small-boat trips, but there is something uniquely dogged and relentless about Caffyn's feats. It takes a remarkable mind-set to come ashore day after day exhausted and face down the option of just quitting every evening. To make your first human in weeks late one afternoon, yet decline the offer of a shower and hot meal in favour of pushing on because daylight still remains. Caffyn's determination is the same sort of grinding force that wears down mountains grain by grain. The kind that builds empires, wins wars, and simply ensures genetic continuity.

Caffyn's greatest single achievement, and probably the one for which he will be remembered the longest, was his mostly solo kayak circumnavigation of Australia, a distance of 15,160 km (9,420 miles), which he completed in 360 days. To do so, he had to average over 42 km (26 miles) a day, including rest days and days off for illness and bad weather. If you consider only the days he paddled, his average distance was more than 59 km (36.5 miles) a day. Think about that!

A good day for Caffyn was topping 93 km (50 nautical miles). Some days, he paddled over 110 km (60 nm), and on three occasions more than 160 km (100 miles) because the coastline was too inhospitable for landing. There were no cheap miles, either. His entire journey was completed without the benefit of sail.

Those who discount Caffyn's efforts because of his use of land-support teams fail to recognize the epic nature of his undertakings. Certainly a support crew contributed to the comfort of his journeys (which seem spartan enough by most people's standards), but some were done with little or no support. During his Alaskan trip, for example, Caffyn paddled its entire 7600 km (4,700-mile) coastline over three summers without any land support at all.

Caffyn, you could rightly say, is a kayak junkie. If he is not getting his regular fix, he aches for the next expedition. He likens it to postpartum depression. When a trip is over, he celebrates with friends, then sinks into gloom until a new plan is hatched.

It all started back in 1977, when Caffyn switched from mountaineering to serious sea kayaking. He purchased a Nordkapp—"the only kayak available locally at the time," he said—and quickly fell in love with it. The Nordkapp is a British version of the traditional West Greenland design. Though it was scarcely suitable for the sort of trips to which Caffyn would subject it, he found that the Nordkapp handled well once fitted with a deep rudder. He stuck with it, even though it lacked the stability to allow him to sleep or even relieve himself safely in a rough sea.

In 1978, Caffyn circumnavigated the South Island of New Zealand solo, a 2500 km (1,550-mile) journey that he completed in 75 days. In 1979, he circumnavigated the North Island, 2700 km (1,700 miles) in 86 days. To top off a good year, he and his friend Max Reynolds also knocked off the circumnavigation of southern New Zealand's Stewart Island, including crossings of Cook and Foveaux Straits.

But Caffyn was just warming up. The following year, he teamed up with British paddler Nigel Dennis to circumnavigate the island of Britain—a cool 3500 km (2,200 miles)—supported by his loyal crew and greatest admirer, Lesley Hadley. If Caffyn deserves a gold star for his monumental epics at sea, Hadley surely deserves the award for most reliable friend since Frodo's Sam. It was after the British trip that Caffyn and Hadley realized they were hooked on long-distance paddling.

Caffyn's epic circumnavigation of Australia in 1982 was something of a homecoming. He had been born and raised in Brisbane, after all, before moving to New Zealand. His journey up the Queensland coast was shared by siblings and other relatives who offered support and hospitality along the way. The trip also included lively encounters with box jellyfish and sea wasps, sharks bumping against his boat, saltwater crocs giving him the evil eye, and deadly sea snakes lolling about on the surface, prone to accidentally getting wrapped around his paddle shaft.

Caffyn had published his three books on his New Zealand circumnavigations—*Obscured by Waves*, *Cresting the Restless Waves*, and *Dark Side of the Wave*—and self-published his Australian odyssey, *The Dreamtime Voyage*, which was clearly a more significant and better yarn, with fine photographs, if in need of a good editor. The very quality that ensured his expeditionary success—determination (a.k.a. stubbornness)—also proved to be his greatest liability when it came to dealing with publishers.

In 1985, Caffyn made a 6470 km (4,021-mile) solo navigation of the main islands of Japan in 112 days. This was before sea kayaking had become established there, and it almost certainly nurtured the seeds of what, within 10 years, would become a popular sport in Japan. Caffyn raced around the islands averaging 58 km (36 miles) a day. His trip was a marine marathon, done on a diet of rice, fish, and vegetables, a departure from his usual fare of dehydrated prepared meals and granola. It was a journey of

tactical manoeuvres to cope with the remnants of typhoons and other hazardous sea conditions randomly dished up. He mostly paddled from dawn to dark, coming ashore at night to sleep and eat, then moved on in pursuit of his single-minded goal. Once again, Hadley was there, providing support.

What makes the man tick? His books give some clues, though Caffyn is the classic paradox of a private person who gains recognition through his exploits, yet keeps most of his life and feelings hidden from view. Under duress at sea, he will maintain focus by rehearsing the precise finger work of a violin concerto while being hammered by eight-foot seas. From that, I learned he is a musician and, by prodding, discovered that he taught music and physical education for a time before rejoining the real world as a helicopter-borne exploration geologist at a coal mine near Greymouth, New Zealand.

He has become active in the New Zealand paddling community, publishing his own journals, then taking on the editing the newsletter for the Kiwi Association of Sea Kayakers.

In 1987, and again in 1989, Caffyn attempted to kayak across the Tasman Sea. The first attempt was thwarted by Tasmanian authorities, who didn't want a repeat performance of a previous rescue in which they had lost one of their own men.

In 1989, after Caffyn had selected a partner and designed a tandem kayak for their crossing, it was the weather and the prospect of weeks at sea out of sight of land that apparently panicked his partner into aborting the trip.

Caffyn headed north in 1991 and soloed the entire coastline of Alaska, from Prince Rupert to Inuvik, over the next three summers. There were no access roads and no Hadley to lend support. Caffyn was on his own. His Alaskan trip included some heart-stopping moments such as a bear ripping open his tent as he slept. He was also swarmed by walruses and charged by a musk ox. All the while, Caffyn adhered to a rigid set of self-imposed rules that forbade him to drag his kayak along the shore ice to reach the next open lead of water. No, he had to paddle all the way!

Perhaps this discipline was what enabled him to maintain his focus and deal with the temptation to quit. Quitting was always a last resort. He did it once when he encountered the Exxon Valdez oil spill, but returned the next year to take up where he left off. Caffyn's demon is the temptation to quit. His reward is simply the satisfaction of successfully overcoming physical hardship through endurance and raw courage.

Now, at the age of 59 (2005), Caffyn has plenty to feel proud of and few regrets. Well, maybe he could have done more. There were a few years when he was in his prime but missed the chance of another epic kayak journey, choosing instead to "slave away in a coal mine," as he said. There was Africa, for example, and South America, and the coast of China. He really didn't give them a fair go. Reality usually makes itself felt in the joints, and he now plans more modest trips. He'll take his time to check out the rock gardens and smell the seaweed, maybe even troll for a mackerel.

He's learned plenty from his thousands of kilometres paddled (more than 50,000 km at last count), and not all of it has been about kayaking, weather, and waves. Most important, he has learned about what he calls mateship. He is still close to Hadley, his old support crew, and to a string of friends around the world. As in war, the bonds of these friendships, built under duress, hardship, and trust, are broken only by death.

Kayaking has been kind to Paul Caffyn but not generous. It has provided him with a means to a powerful sense of personal fulfilment. Someday the world is going to wake up to the fact that they have virtually overlooked an extraordinary adventurer. Maybe then he will receive the recognition he has earned.