

Paul Caffyn Around Alaska - Part I

Big Surf, Big Tides & An Oil Spill!

Prince Rupert to False Pass

2 -18 April 1989 14 May - 29 June -1990



During a crossing of Port Bainbridge, I was drenched with spray when this big humpback whale took a breath, then the big tail lifted up as it sounded.

The Challenge

It wasn't long after my 1985 kayak circumnavigation of Japan that I began researching and planning a tidewater circumnavigation of Alaska. The worst side of sea kayaking for me was the immediate period following the conclusion of a successful trip. It was not one of elation and satisfaction, as you might expect, but was more akin to post-natal depression. Once my elusive goal had been attained, there was nothing else really to strive for. I found the best way to cope with this post-trip depression was to pull out a world atlas and begin to plan another outrageous adventure.

Since the eastern border of Alaska is landlocked against Canada, I decided to have a crack at paddling from Prince Rupert on the northern coast of British Columbia to Inuvik near the Arctic Coast of Canada. Short of lashing the kayak onto a sled and following a dog team south to Prince Rupert, I would have to be satisfied with what I termed a tidewater - in the sea from start to finish - circumnavigation of Alaska. Although the stretched out length of Alaska's shoreline totaled 33,904 miles, my planned route involved 4,600 miles of paddling, give or take a mile or two.

At an anticipated all up average of 30 miles a day, I figured by starting in early April I should knock the trip off comfortably inside five months.

This trip appealed to me for two main reasons. Firstly no one had paddled the entire route before, and secondly, kayaks and the art of kayaking largely evolved in Alaskan waters. Since all my previous trips had been in waters where dugout canoes or rafts were used by the locals, it felt like I was taking my kayak on a nostalgic journey home. I'd been talking for years about writing an authoritative manual on sea kayaking but a lack of experience in ice conditions had been a great excuse for not completing the book. I needed to round off my experience with a trip into Arctic waters where kayaks had played such a major role in providing transportation for the Eskimos.

For three years I accumulated information on Alaska's coastline, building up a detailed picture of all the things that would affect me, prevailing winds and currents, ice pack break-up dates and how best to deal with the bears. By starting in early spring from Prince Rupert, I felt confident of cracking the whole trip in one season, provided the ice pack allowed me

an easy passage past Cape Barrow, the northernmost tip of Alaska.

The solution to the problem of food resupply with New Zealand freeze-dry meals was simple. I picked out coastal villages from a small-scale map of Alaska, then checked the zip code list for those with post offices. Mailing boxes c/o general delivery to coastal village post offices was a widely accepted practice in Alaska.

1989 PRINCE RUPERT to ELFIN COVE

Not a Good Year for Kayaking

Early evening on March 25, I had finished sorting and packing 17 boxes of food in the basement of a friend's house on Vancouver Island when I was called to watch an item on the television news. I was dismayed to hear of an oil spill in Prince William Sound. The Exxon Valdez had strayed out of its shipping lane and run aground on Bligh Reef, spewing 11 million gallons of crude oil into the sound. Although the sound was on my projected route, I wasn't too bothered initially and assumed, as most people did, that the spill would quickly be contained.

Ever since 1977, a daily flow of two millions barrels of crude oil had been piped south from the Arctic coast across Alaska to the small fishing port of Valdez in Prince William Sound, from where tankers transported the crude south to the Lower 48 (an Alaskan term for the rest of the USA).

On schedule, but with my usual pre-trip jitters, I paddled away from Prince Rupert on 2 April and lost touch with the outside world for the next four weeks as I worked northwards through Clarence and Chatham straits towards my first food dump at Elfin Cove.

The spring of 1989 was bleak and cold in south-east Alaska. Streams tumbling out of the forest were freeze-framed as stalagmites of ice while snow banks lay thickly on the cobble beaches. It had been a long hard winter. I didn't talk to a soul for eight days.



1 April 1989: about to board a BC ferry for the crossing to Prince Rupert and the start of the paddle



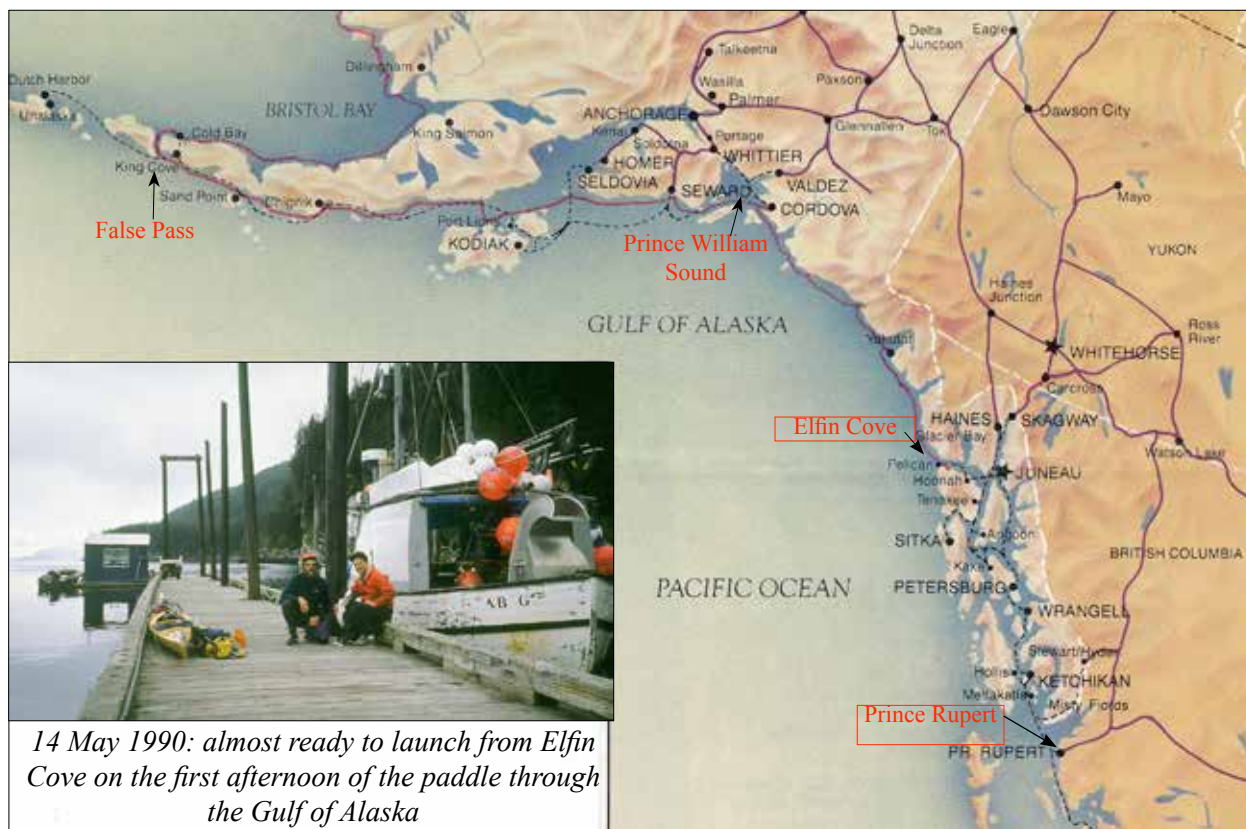
The old bull orca with a serious case of flacid fin syndrome. One of the highlights of the 1989 paddle

When I passed two loggers fishing from a dinghy, I called out a cheery, "Great day for it." In reply they just grunted at me. I kept paddling.

As the trip progressed, my morale and confidence sadly sagged. The kayak was leaking in two compartments. I had to light a fire each night to dry out my gear. Sub-zero Celsius temperatures morning and night didn't help my attempts to fix the leaks. I located pinprick holes by using my mouth against the hull to suck air, then tipped white spirits into each hole and lit the fluid to dry out the kevlar. The only way to harden the fibreglass patches was to use the M.S.R. cooker as a flamethrower.

A pod of killer whales was the highlight of that year. The bull was so old, the top of his massive sail-like dorsal fin, a full eight feet high, had drooped down towards his back. Like a mini submarine, he cruised by my bow less than a paddle length away.

When I slipped into Elfin Cove, I was considering abandoning the trip. What with the continuing problems of leaks and cold temperatures, I was definitely not enjoying myself. Salmon fishermen at the cove related horror stories of how the Exxon Valdez oil spill was now totally out of control, and spreading down both sides of Kodiak Island. They reckoned I would end up looking like a slime ball if I continued paddling. I could not bear the idea of paddling through a sound littered with the oil-slimed



carcasses of birds and sea otters, nor did I fancy trying to keep my paddle shaft clean of oil - attempting to roll would be comparable to climbing a greasy pole - so I decided to abandon the trip at Elfin Cove and head home to NZ to lick my wounds.

1990 - ELFIN COVE to NOME A Brilliant Year for Kayaking

At midday on May 14, a floatplane dropped me back into the tiny fishing community of Elfin Cove. Moored to the dock was the salmon boat, *A.B. & G.*, lovingly titled 'All Balls and Guts' by its crew, which had brought my replacement twin-skinned kevlar Nordkapp out from Juneau. Psychologically and physically, I was in top condition. I'd spent the past two months training daily on a wave ski in the West Coast surf in front of my cottage, and had just completed a 200 mile training trip in the inside passages of S.E. Alaska.

The next 430 miles to Cordova had an awesome reputation for rotten weather and huge surf breaking onto exposed beaches. There are only two lee landings, at Yakutat and Icy Bay, which is why I'd spent so much time training in the West Coast surf. I knew of only one party of two who'd kayaked this coast since the turn of the century. One paddler had suffered a broken nose when a bumper dumper wave had smashed his paddle shaft back into his face. In two single kayaks, the men had spent two periods of 36 hours at sea to avoid big surf landings.

On the floating dock in Elfin Cove, I finished loading my gear and equipment for the next four months, with sufficient food to last to my first food dump at the Yakutat Post Office. Under a leaden sky, three fishermen watched me silently head out into Cross Sound, on a course for Cape Spencer. I had an equally leaden feeling in my gut as I plugged into a low chop, bucking the flood tidal stream pouring into the sound.

Very few people knew of this trip, and they were all sworn to secrecy. This was partly in response to trauma and stress caused by the maritime authorities during previous paddling trips in Japan and Tasmania. My sole back up was a hard case kayaker in Ketchikan who I would phone each time I reached a food drop post office. I would give Geoff Grosse my anticipated E.T.A. and he was only to notify the U.S. Coastguard that I was overdue if he hadn't heard anything within seven days of that time. I would be totally reliant on my own resources for the next four months. It was total commitment and that's what I wanted.

The Fairweather Coast?

Fishermen term the stretch of coast from Cape Spencer to Yakutat the 'Fairweather coast'. As he sailed northwards in 1778, Captain Cook named both Cape Fairweather and Mount Fairweather, a 15,300-foot high snow-clad peak only a few miles inland from the cape. The salmon and halibut fishermen reckon Cook must have struck it lucky and maintain that the term Fairweather was a misnomer. When talking to

them about weather and sea conditions, they would scratch their heads and say, "Well, we had a calm day off Cape Fairweather back in '83 or was it '82." I could only hope they were exaggerating.

I must have, like Cook, struck it lucky, for although the sky remained sullenly overcast, the wind remained light. I passed the four-mile wide snout of the La Perouse Glacier on 15 May, and next morning a break in the cloud revealed a magnificent backdrop of the Fairweather Range. Shimmering icy peaks, broad neve fields and crevassed glaciers marching towards the sea, towered over the coastal strip of forest. I wished for an ice axe and crampons and promised myself a trip back one day to climb Mt Fairweather.

Tiredly I rounded Ocean Cape late evening on 18 May to enter the shelter of Monti Bay with Yakutat at its head. That I'd knocked up 59 miles since dawn was a credit to my pre-trip training, not to mention wanting to avoid another big surf landing. That first 176-mile stage was in many ways the crux of the 1990 Alaskan trip, physically and mentally. Having overcome it, not with ease but in style, I knew I had the mettle to carry on with the next 3,000 miles.

The next 250-mile leg to Cordova was just as committing but I now had a psychological edge. In a massive dumping surf at Point Manby, I almost looped end over end when the second wave of a set caught me scrambling out of the cockpit onto a steep gravel beach. Catapulted out of the cockpit, I grabbed the bow and struggled clear of the undertow, losing only piece of mind and a water container off the stern.

Arriving in Icy Bay, I was nearly an exposure case within 10 minutes of landing. An icy blast off the snow-clad peaks of the St Elias Mountains was funneling out of the bay. The only lee protection on the bare sand spit was a drift-log and I had the devil's own job trying to keep my dome tent in contact with



In Icy Bay, the only lee protection on the sand spit for the tent was the huge drift log

the ground until it was firmly guyed to the log. A big brew of hot tea re-established circulation to my hands.

Icy Cape lived up to its reputation as I slipped out of Icy Bay. With an ebbing tide I ran into a solid white line of ice. It was not sea ice but hard glacial ice fed into the bay by a host of major glaciers which have their snouts in the Pacific Ocean. Because of this, they are termed tidewater glaciers.

Particularly on this initial 430 mile of exposed Gulf of Alaska coast from Elfin Cove to Cordova, I would have preferred the company of a co-paddler however I knew that I was faster and far more flexible operating on my lonesome. Who in their right mind would paddle 50 miles during the day on the outside of the Copper River delta, stop for a brew and a dehi-dinner, kip for an hour on a sandbank, then paddle all night to work a big flood tide over 'The Hump' in order to catch the Cordova Post Office before it closed on Saturday?

Mind you I didn't make it in time. What I had not foreseen was a big 15-foot flood tide that was accompanied by what the fishermen call a minus tide. In this case the tide sucked out to a level 4.5 feet below the low water springs mark. As I neared the saddle of 'The Hump', a short cut used by Copper River salmon fishermen and marked by spruce poles stuck in sandbanks, the tide was sucking out on both sides. Five minutes later the saddle would have been dry. Water from the drying sand banks was funneling into a steeply dropping channel.

On the western side of The Hump, the kayak dropped with a lurch over a gravel bar into a series of rapids. Just like paddling a glacial fed river, I headed for the V at the head of each rapid then over drops of two to three feet and swung through sweeping S bends, punching through big pressure waves. I was swept down-channel, broad mud/sandbanks on each side, for half a mile until the gradient eased. Exposed mud flats kept pushing me away from Cordova. Not a single salmon skiff had sped past me. Only then did my tired brain register that the channel leading to Cordova had dried out completely with the minus tide.

Patience was the order of the day. I dragged the boat up three feet to the top of the mud flats, laid down on my parka for a wee kip and only woke up when the incoming tide began surging around my ankles.

Prince William Sound

From Cordova I was able to avoid the Gulf of Alaska for a few days by ducking into the sheltered waters of Prince William Sound. I was keen to find out



On Evans Island, I camped back in the forest edge, clear of the sad evidence of the Exxon Valdez oil spill in the intertidal zone

how badly the oil spill had affected the shores of the sound, and how effective the subsequent clean-up operations had been.

Crossing courses with a south-bound, laden tanker, I noticed two tenders shadowing its wake, obviously to prevent a repetition of when the drunk skipper of the Exxon Valdez retired below to his cabin and left the third mate to steer the vessel onto Bligh Reef.

Apart from a noticeable absence of sea bird life and otters, I saw little sign of the spill till I landed for the night on a gravel beach at the north-eastern end of Evans Island. This beach had been right in the path of the drifting spill. From the high tide mark back to a fringing belt of trees, the beach was coated with oil. An animal, probably a brown bear, had been digging in the beach gravel for shellfish. The pools that had filled with water all had an oily sheen on them. I found a campsite under a tree well inland from the beach for the night.

From a count of 36,000 dead birds picked up in Prince William Sound, experts believed this figure represented between 10 and 30% of the total number that perished. One has to wonder about the sanity of



Turning over rocks on the beach showed the coating of syrupy mousse left from the oil spill

the scientists who carried out a study to check the recovery rate of dead birds. They shot 219 perfectly healthy birds and dipped them in crude oil before dropping them into the sound to see what percentage would float and could be recovered.

Amongst sea kayakers, Prince William Sound had a reputation for outstanding scenery and the presence of several pods of killer whales. You couldn't help bumping into at least one pod. However, in the summer of 1990, exactly 14 months after the spill, I did not sight a single killer whale. The sea and sky were devoid of life.

Ever since the curtailment of the 1989 trip, I'd felt a twinge of guilt that I should have continued paddling through the oil devastated areas, and recorded first-hand the damage. But after talking to people who were involved with the clean up crews, they all said I would have probably broken bones while carrying the kayak up oil-coated rocks. Apparently broken legs and collar bones were common injuries amongst the crews.

A Whale of a Time

On 1 June, I left the sound's shelter for the open waters of the gulf, en route to my next food drop at the port of Seward. I was apprehensive heading offshore but the day was made by a magical experience, one of the highlights of the summer. I heard the sound of a whale spouting and swiveled my head until I saw a thin spout of misty spume, intermittently fountaining out of the sea. During past trips I'd been literally scared out of my wits by whales suddenly surfacing alongside the kayak but I'd never had the presence of mind to take a photograph.

This large humpback whale was regularly spouting three times before sounding and diving for several minutes. I stopped paddling and retrieved the two cameras from my middle compartment. Slinging them round my neck, I resumed my course.

I knew I was in the approximate position where the humpback would surface again but wasn't quite prepared for the massive, grey submarine like body surfacing less than 30 feet away, so close in fact that I was drenched by a fine spray when the whale spouted. Its exhaled breath smelt like the stale inside of Icelandic fish factory with a tinge of cod liver oil. Twice more the whale spouted, while I clicked the camera shutters. Then its huge tail lifted 15 feet majestically into the air, almost directly over the bow. Click. I hoped trembling hands had not spoilt one of the greatest shots I'd ever taken at sea.



The sliver of driftwood points to the Barren Islands, halfway across Cook Inlet to Kodiak Island. The arrows show tidal stream direction

Fogged In

From the end of the Kenai Peninsula, I was faced with the next big crux, a long exposed 55-mile crossing to Kodiak Island. Swift tidal races, a reputation for rapid weather changes, thick clammy fog and strong winds left me gripped as I kicked out for the Barren Islands, a small group of islands midway across. It took me two days to complete the crossing, with an overnight stop on Ushagat Island. On both days, I was enveloped in thick, damp fog banks. In visibility less than 200 feet, I was absolutely reliant on my deck-mounted binnacle compass, and had to juggle both wind and tidal stream drift to ensure a landfall.

The second leg of the crossing had all the makings of a major epic. I'd waited until 5:30 pm for a series of big tide races and toppling overfalls to settle down before launching. Initially I had a visual sight onto a hazy snow-topped range on Kodiak Island and was able to correct for tidal drift by checking transits over my shoulder on the Barren Islands. Then from seawards, I noticed the swirling tendrils of a dank fog bank sweeping towards me. I scarcely had time to recheck the compass course to Kodiak Island before I was enveloped in the chilling gloom of a dense fog bank.

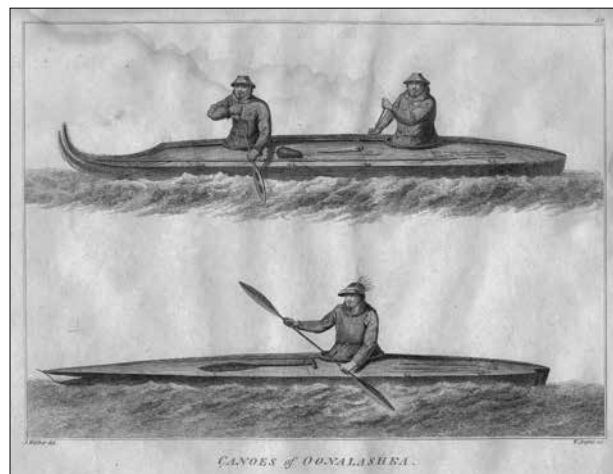
For the next three hours, I struggled against a choppy beam sea to maintain my compass heading. It was a nasty weather tide situation, a 15 knot south-easterly wind blowing against the tide ebbing out of Cook Inlet. When the short, five-foot chop began breaking, I was totally gripped. By 10.30 pm, according to the elapsed timer on my watch, I should have sighted land. The sea had eased when the tide began flooding but I was still totally immersed in a grey-out. I could neither sight land nor hear the sound of surf on shore. Re-checking the distance for the umpteenth time, I could only hold the compass heading and try to keep mounting anxiety under control. I wasn't prepared for a full night at sea. I had no food handy and the red navigation torch buried deep in the middle compartment.

Fifteen minutes later, I was desperately trying to work out why I'd overshot the island when I noticed a slight increase in the visibility. Glimpses of the sun sinking golden in the west lifted my sagging morale. I kept sweeping my gaze in an 180° arc over the bow. Then a few minutes before 11:00 pm, I glimpsed a faint smear of rock through the fog to my left. It was Dark Island, my aiming point. That wretched wind and flood tidal stream had pushed me off course by just on a mile. Needless to say, I was rather pleased to reach terra firma again. I didn't quite kiss the ground, but that was one hell-of-a crossing to have left astern.

During the following three days as I headed down through Shelikof Strait, the few fisherfolk I met shook their heads when I told them where I'd come from. The skipper of the salmon seiner Lady Beth said, "I won't even take my boat across via the Barren Islands, and it's a 35-footer!" A lass at the old Port William cannery, now turned into a fishing and hunting lodge, would not fly across that stretch of water. It was too turbulent for her in a floatplane.

The Alaska Peninsula - Aleut Country

From Kodiak Island, I made a swift and enjoyable 23-mile crossing of Shelikof Strait to the Alaska Peninsula and that's when my lucky break with a run of reasonable weather came to an end. Each night at 6.30 pm, after the television news, a 20-minute program on the Alaskan weather was broadcast. Mark Evangelista, the hard case presenter, turned the mundane details about pressure gradients and synoptic situations into a humorous, enjoyable session watched Alaska wide by aircraft pilots and fishermen. The night I'd spent at Port William cannery, Mark pointed to a small high pressure cell and said, "Remember this for nostalgia's sake. It's the last one we are going to see for a long time."



Baidarkas of Prince William Sound and Unalaska, drawn by John Webber during Cook's 1778 voyage

For the two weeks it took me to struggle down to my next food dump at Chignik, cold front followed cold front in a seemingly endless progression with ever so short lulls in between, when I would fight a few miles to the south-west from lee landing to lee landing. Survival became dependent on my ability to read the wind shifts by direction changes in the cloud movement.

When I finally limped into Chignik, 19 days out of Seward, I was shattered physically. All that remained of my food supplies were a couple of dry crackers, a spoonful each of sugar and powdered milk and one freeze-dry meal. Pete Nolan, a jovial Australian fishing boat skipper, plied me with pizzas and tins of meat in an attempt to put some condition back onto my lean frame.

False Pass was my next objective, a narrow channel at the western tip of the Alaska Peninsula, where the waters of the Pacific Ocean and the Bering Sea rush through at great speed. Whether it was the pizzas and tins of meat or a moderate run with semi-settled weather, I averaged 44 miles per day for the next 265 miles to False Pass.

The Russian Influence

One of my lunch stops en-route to False Pass was a gravel beach below the abandoned village of Belkofski. On a bare grassy slope overlooking the beach, the most ornate and grandiose building was a Russian orthodox church. All the other buildings apart from the school were ramshackle cottages. Originally established as a Russian trading settlement, Belkofski was a centre for rich sea otter hunting grounds. Although Russia sold Alaska to the U.S.A. in 1867, the village remained under the tyrannical dictatorship of a priest. This pontifical pirate charged the Aleut natives a fee of sea otter pelts for marriage ceremonies, births, christenings and funerals. He had



27 June: The abandoned Aleut village of Belkofski where sadly, the most grandiose building is the Russian orthodox church



23 June: Seal Cape, south-west of Chignik. An early evening dinner in the heart of brown bear country, before moving on to camp for the night

such a hold over the Aleuts that when he rang the church bell, no matter what the time of the day, they had to attend a service.

Belkofski was a favourite stopping place for whaling ships, partly because the vessels could stock up on fresh food, but also because the priest always had a considerable stock of rum and whisky. He was also an avid poker player. One evening, during a game with the captain and crew of a whaling ship, the priest had a bad run of cards and ran out of money. Although it was long after midnight, he rang the church bell and donned his vestments. The locals took some time to wander bleary-eyed into the church. The priest chanted a few prayers, took up a collection and then disappeared back to the poker game.

The Aleut sea otter hunters had developed the skills of kayaking and hunting to a state of perfection. Captain Cook was amazed to find that the Aleuts experienced no trouble in keeping pace with his Resolution while it was sailing at a steady seven knots. Their kayaks, called baidarkas, were works of technological achievement, the only kayaks in the world to have shims of polished ivory or bone inserted between the lashed pieces of wooden frameworks. These shims prevented wear, and added flexibility to a kayak's framework. Four or five sea lion skins were cut to shape by the men and sewn by the women over the baidarka frame to form a completely waterproof skin.

It was a great tragedy that the Russians first discovered Alaska in 1741. Reports of seas teeming with sea otters led to a stampede by Russian hunters to make their fortunes with what became known as the golden fleeces - the Chinese were insatiable buyers of the short-haired pelts. These Siberian hunters who became known as the Promyshlenniks were the low life of Russia. Bone and ivory tipped spears and arrows were no match for Russian firearms and poison. Localized

efforts by the Aleut villages to repel the hunters led to bloody massacres and razing to ground level of villages.

One of the worst recorded incidents was perpetrated by Ivan Soloviev, the commander of two trading vessels. At the village of Kashega, he tied 12 Aleuts front-to-back in single file and then fired a musket into the first native. The bullet lodged in the ninth Aleut - nine skilled baidarka men killed with a single shot. By the time Captain Cook visited the Aleutian Islands in 1778, the Aleuts had been completely subjugated by the Russian hunters. Of an original population of 16,000 less than a half remained. They never recovered.

On several occasions in the old Aleut hunting grounds, I had an eerie, spine tingling feeling of not being alone at sea. I felt a distinct presence around me. I could only sense as the spirit of the old baidarka men.

False Pass

By late afternoon of 28 June, I was 'racing in the streets' for the shelter of False Pass. The day was turning into a bit of an epic. I'd rounded up into the lee of Egg Island for lunch and a brief respite from the breaking south-easterly swell. I disturbed a mob of sea otters resting on a rock shelf and grinned when the mothers grabbed their wee pups in their teeth and dived into the sea.

Twenty five miles of exposed weather shore remained to the entrance of False Pass. Since Egg Island had no fresh water and no level areas to camp, I had to either shoot the gap for False Pass or paddle across to a sandy beach on the mainland. Several times I climbed up onto a high point to gauge the density of whitecaps and feel the wind strength. Deciding it was absolutely marginal, I kicked out for 10 minutes to see if I could cope with the conditions. On a five-foot breaking chop, buffeted by williwaws and a showery 25 knot south-easterly, I crossed a deep bay and commenced a four hour struggle to keep a little distance between me and surf breaking on a jagged rocky shoreline.

Apart from my arms steadily grinding in 38 paddling strokes a minute, the only thing that kept me from being driven against the rocks and cliffs was the deep draft oversterm rudder. Of all the 89 days of the 1990 trip, this was the one when the rudder was absolutely magical. The wind, gusting to 30 knots with hard driving rain squalls, was square on my beam. To correct for wind and chop drift, I had to maintain a course well south of the coast. Although I was mostly

within a mile of shore, the rain was so heavy at times that I was forced to rely on a compass heading.

More and more cockpit curlers began breaking over the decks. I tried a little bit of forced singing for a while, but then as the wind strength kept increasing and my body began chilling down, I had to pull the drawstring of the parka hood into a tight circle with only my nose and eyes peeking out. No more singing.

My first glimpse of the Palisade Cliffs, a vertical tier of sheer rock that guards the entrance to False Pass, brought a shadow of relief. I took note of the compass heading before the viz socked in again and gritted my teeth for the last four miles. The wind was raging at a steady 35 knots, driving before it a seven-foot-high breaking chop. Rain was pelting down. My concentration was riveted on making the shelter of the pass. Closing on the cliffs, their tops hidden in cloud, I cast fleeting glimpses at waterfalls toppling out of the cloud base. Now with the wind and chop on my stern quarter, I was flying along but holding back on the surfing runs as the chop was too short and too steep. No time for an end over.

Bouncing into the shallows, and at last clear of the breaking chop, I took note which way the long brown streamers of kelp were lying. The flood tidal stream sets north through False Pass at speeds up to eight knots and it was almost high tide. I bounced through a big rapid with a series of standing pressure waves and was chuffed to find the tide with me - only five miles to the village of False Pass. On a flat sea, broken only by tide races, huge bubbling boils and the odd small overfall, I flew through those five miles at about 12 knots, with a little help from the tide and wind. I'd been warned to steer well clear of Whirl Point. The whirlpool was so big and swift, it would suck the kayak down or so the fishermen had reckoned.

The rain was still belting down but the wind had eased to about 20 knots. Keeping out in mid-channel, with just enough viz to sight the shore on either side, I shot past Whirl Point almost before noticing it. Two miles to go, and the village should have been in sight. Bounced from side to side by big boiling eddies, at last I glimpsed a bright light though the clag and began a long ferry glide towards shore. Still steaming along at 10 knots, I shot under a long wooden jetty and could see buildings and houses of the village. Totally shagged, but wearing a whisker of a smile at the corner of my mouth, I ground the bow onto a gravel beach and staggered ashore. I had just passed the half way mark to Nome - 1,354 miles down and about the same number to go.