

EXCERPTS FROM THE DIARY OF S/SGT. ED HILL

Port Hardy to Victoria

Port Hardy to Fort Rupert

The short pull from Port Hardy to Fort Rupert would provide Skookum Kalitan and our crew one of the best races we had throughout the entire journey. It would be against Roy and his determined crew in Nunsal Salis....."Hugh Westhauser was at the helm today. John had asked him to do that as he had meetings and the like with Tribal Journeys. Hugh at the helm would play a factor in what was to happen. He is a retired member of 63 years. He is a nice man who's character was a big plus on the Journey. His ready smile and willingness to help at all times made him a "keeper". Everybody likes Hugh. But, Hugh isn't competitive in nature I don't believe.

As we pulled out of Port Hardy towards a point of land on our right I looked back to see Roy's canoe about a quarter mile behind. I could see that their pace and stroke was such that they were trying hard to catch up, not immediately but rather he'd pace them to catch us in a couple of miles or so. At this point he wasn't racing, merely attempting to secure his "rightful" position before we got to our destination of Deer Island.

Let's put one thing on the table here. I've been known to have a competitive personality too. My ego insists that whenever possible, I want to finish first too. Having said that, what happened over the next hour was not about that. I wanted to prove something to myself and to the others I suppose. I pointed out to the others in our canoe that Roy was gaining and we developed a game plan. We'd paddle just hard enough to keep ahead of Roy and we'd do it without looking like it. There would be no calling of pace, no extra length of pull, no demonstration of working hard. We'd make it look as much as we could like we were just pulling happily along. By now we were the lead canoe. If Roy's canoe and ours had a competitive spirit, Chris's was exactly the opposite. I can't recall once on the Journey when they engaged us in the fun races that would inevitably happen each day.

As we progressed along the shoreline we pulled past a huge raft of logs all boomed into a bay. We were pulling within a few feet of the log boom as it was directly in our intended course. We were the lead canoe at this time with Chris's canoe about a hundred yards behind us. Roy was a considerable distance back. Ahead, on the log boom we could see seagulls resting, at least a thousand seagulls. The boom was white, if not with seagulls then with their droppings. It was mid day and they'd already been out for their morning feed so they were resting contented in the midday sun. Normally, if we approach quietly, we could pass disturbing only a few birds who may rise into the breeze and reposition themselves further away from us. As long as the others don't panic they'll merely sit and watch us pass. We pulled quietly towards the watchful flock. Now, within a couple of hundred feet, Mark Sorokan let loose. He is a man of many faces and many voices. One such voice is that of a convincing and loud fog horn. The fog horn sounded and the flock panicked. A thousand frantic gulls rose into the air and

flew away from the disturbing blast. They flew directly away from us, gaining a little altitude in the process. At about 50 feet they obviously felt that they were out of harm's way so the entire flock decided to come back and see what all the noise was about. They turned in a tight circle and came right back at us. We all hoped that Mark hadn't scared the shit out of them, however, as they flew overhead our worst fears were realized. At least a few had obviously been very scared. The flock kept going and I guess they weren't sure which canoe had made the noise. They checked out Chris's canoe too. Some of those gulls must have thought the offending fog horn was in that canoe because as the white cloud of wings and feathers passed over his boat Chris's canoe too was baptized with the white goo. The gulls circled toward the land and again settled on the boom. They felt better about what had happened now so they could relax. Some in both canoes were still busy cleaning up while the rest of us were trying to paddle and laugh at the same time. Mark, the fog horn, was laughing the hardest, he was bent over in fits of laughter as we pulled past the boom and made our way to Deer Island.

We pulled along the shore heading south. Our stroke was carrying us faster than it normally would but we were making it look easy. Roy, however, could be heard calling pace to his crew and yelling encouragement. He was gaining. We upped our pull pressure but kept smiling. We looked around and enjoyed the scenery. We ignored Roy and his crew not wanting to have any visual, eye contact, challenges happening. We, for all intents and purposes, weren't racing. We were merely enjoying the paddle of the day. Roy's voice became louder as he realized he was only just keeping pace. His canoe picked up a bit of speed and we responded in a nonchalant way. We picked up speed but still showed no signs of trying too hard.

By now Roy's canoe was up to full reach, full power and full intensity. Their bow wake told the story. It would have rocked the Queen of the North if it had been passing. I stole a peak at Roy as they pulled even with us. They were closest to shore. He had fire in his eyes as he yelled at the crew. The crew was full steam ahead, eyes focused and pulling hard.

"Give her shit guys!" I yelled, and the race was on. Now we dug in with all of our power and determination.

Our canoe lifted and the water passed by the gunnels at an alarming pace. We were within 40 yards of each other and we could see the intensity in each other's vessel. Roy kept yelling a pace. I kept encouraging our canoe with yells now too. We missed Matt behind us. Dave was pulling with his usual determination and Mark was digging deep. Those are the only ones I can see and feel as the others are obliterated by the pullers in front of me. The race is very intense and we are gaining some serious water. Roy is ahead for a time and then we pull ahead. The jockeying goes back and forth. Now both teams are grunting and straining with the fever of the race. How many times over a thousand years have such races been run along these shores? Roy's true colors are showing. He MUST be in front and he's not willing to leave his canoe paddling anywhere but there and if he has to race 15 miles to get there he'll push his people that

far. As for us, we know we're the fastest and we merely enjoy watching and listening to the entertainment as Roy pushes his crew.

Ahead is a rock off shore. It is surrounded by kelp that is floating on the shore at this low tide. There is a gap between the rock and the shore of perhaps 150 yards. The kelp restricts that channel so that there is about 100 yards of clear water. Our race is for that channel. Unspoken, we know that whoever gains that channel first wins the race. They'll be ahead coming out the other side and that will break the other's spirit. The race is frantic, controlled and pitched. By now our conditioning and technique is such that we are really getting the maximum out of our canoes. The bows are raised up in aggressive form as they cut the water. The voices and urgings are everywhere and the canoes are propelled by strength and desire. Then, our canoe veers left.

Hugh has chosen a course around the rock to the left. The kelp bed out there stretches another 50 yards past the rock. We are taking the long way around. It was as if we were on a track racing and approaching the last turn and without any sense of reason we pull to the outside lane while our opponent continues to race on the inside lane. Many of us in the canoe yelled at Hugh as we pulled. "Take the inside Hugh!" "Where the hell are we going Hugh?" We kept pulling.

As we approached the rock Roy was slightly behind us but pulling hard. We kept up the intensity, resigned to the fact that we'd just have to beat him the hard way. Roy disappeared behind the rock and we were left alone to motivate ourselves in the last part of the pull. I yelled encouragement and orders and the team responded. Heads down, we continued the pull. The canoe was jetting along but we had a long way to go. As we pulled past the rock Roy came into view. The shorter course had worked to his advantage. He was well ahead of us. He had won. Our spirit was gone, the pace slowed and the canoe's bow dropped back into the water. There were a few words of protest aimed at Hugh but nobody stays upset with that guy. We just hadn't had the competitive spirit in each and every seat.

Fort Rupert

At Fort Rupert we met up with many other canoes, Tribal Journeys was a gathering of canoes from many and varied native communities, all destined for Victoria and the Aboriginal Games. We'd travel the rest of the journey with their ever increasing numbers. There on the grass was a huge dugout canoe, not yet finished. The native people were working on it, determined to have it join the trip to Victoria. It ultimately did, but not without a lot of hard work. After a day of rest at Fort Rupert I went to bed in my tent readying myself for the next day....."At 11:00PM the bed roll looks pretty good. I manage to get there without too much trouble. My last hour of this relaxing day is spent watching the guys work on the canoes. One in particular is stopping every few strokes of the adze and flexing his wrist and arm. He is obviously in pain from days of non stop work. Their work would continue all night through without stop. When we would awake in the morning we would hear the same sounds that had put us to sleep. We'd go to sleep and wake to the drumming of those adze as they cut out their canoe chip by chip.

The glow of their flood light and the drumming of their adze conjured up images of a campfire in a circle of tents and the drumming of the warriors as they watched over the settlement. It was a wonderful way to drift off, letting my imagination take me on a journey back in time.

Fort Rupert to Alert Bay

From this day on we'd usually paddle a day on and a day off. Those not pulling would drive U-Haul trucks, kindly donated by the company. Those trucks contained all of our gear, food and the like. At Campbell River the Western Spirit would leave us and we'd need those trucks.

At Alert Bay we were treated to a most impressive Big House and ceremonies. Here are a few paragraphs from my journal describing that impressive place....."The Big House at Alert Bay was a BIG house. It was the biggest we had seen to date. Outside and behind it was a tall slender totem. It was uninteresting and mostly featureless save for the sunburst at its top. The pole must have stood 100 feet tall. Inside the totems supporting the building were impressive and equally massive. The seating around the sides went up about 12 tiers. It was a big house!

NOTE: At this writing, September 5, 1997, the Big House in Alert Bay is gone. Last Sunday someone burned it down. All that's left is a pile of charcoal and memories. They will rebuild. There is a man, non native, presently before the courts charged with arson.

....."The dancing and songs were the best yet. They were colorful and animated, full of energy and pride. The place was full to overcrowded yet everyone was fixated with the power of the demonstration. I was glad that we were all there in our yellow coats to see and to be seen. Then, I had to leave. There were no billets arranged as we had been told there would be so we'd have to pitch our tents. I asked permission to leave and took with me 3 others. Our job was to empty the truck and line up the gear and to have the tents put up. That was accomplished and I ended up back at the hall in time to see a bit more of the dancing and more speeches. We left one watchman with the gear and all was set.

Alert Bay to Kelsey Bay

Our stop here turned out to be very gratifying. It had turned out to be one of the wettest days of pulling of the entire journey, and one of the longest for some of the crews. We were all soaked to the bone, but I had one more surprise....."At Kelsey Bay we loaded the truck and vans with our gear, they were waiting for us, and up to Sayward we went. It is only 5 minutes away. There we were housed in the Community Centre which is a beautiful facility, one that would be the envy of communities much larger than this little place. The building houses a gymnasium, pool, workout room, sauna and so on. We all found places for our sleeping bags, upstairs and down and we were at home, again in a warm and dry place. When I went to bed though, Joy and I found a spot downstairs, I had found a spot under a pipe, the only pipe in the whole place that had a

leak. I woke to a drip on my forehead and a slight move sideways got me out of it. It seems that on that day I was doomed to be wet all day.

Sayward to Brown's Bay

Typical of the hospitality of virtually every community, Sayward was no exception. I was on the truck that day so I have no pulling stories....."I awoke in the basement of the Community complex at about 6:00AM. From that vantage point there is no telling what kind of a day is outside. Once upstairs though I could see that the rains of yesterday were gone, for the time being at least. The sky promised better things with only broken clouds evident. Cpl. Gary McDowell, the Detachment Commander at Sayward, and a bunch of community members put on a breakfast for us. We had eggs, pancakes, toast, coffee and jam, and of course lots of coffee. This typical community spirit was always uplifting and their support always told us that, we were doing OK in the public's eyes.

Brown's Bay to Campbell River

I would again helm the canoe through the famous Seymour Narrows, touted as one of the most dangerous narrows on the West Coast. We'd do it at slack tide though so there really shouldn't be any problem, or at least that's what I thought when I sat in the stern of the canoe.....""Paddles up! Take her away!"

I knew where we were heading, I just hoped I had the skills to take us through this one more time. I just wish that once I could helm the canoe when the job would be an easy job.

Brown's Bay is home to the marina we were just leaving. The marina itself is a facility of some 5 or 6 fingers on both sides of a main dock. It has the marina and store right there on the dock and it is a relatively new, well kept establishment. It is situated in a bay, Brown's Bay, that is sufficient to protect the docks and the vessels in the marina, from the tides and currents that rush by out in the open channel. Separating the channel from the marina is a line of floating tanks chained together. These tanks look like half sized train tanker cars and there is a line of about 20 of them protecting the marina. To leave the marina you have to navigate to the north end of the line of tanks and make your way out of the entrance/exit. Once you leave the opening, and if the tide is running, you are in the teeth of the current almost immediately. Today the tide we are heading into is running north, or from our right to left. As it speeds by the marina however, it has created a back eddy and that powerful swirl of water is going by the opening to the marina in exactly the opposite direction. For us, our first problem of the day will be the surge of back eddy water going from our left to our right. We'll have to pull our way through that to allow us to get along the shore and pull the distance up to the Narrows. That pull will be along the shore taking advantage of other back eddies. Chris Cooper's canoe is ahead of us, Roy has already gone ahead, and he is first out into the channel. I can feel my adrenaline surge as I watch his canoe jolt at the first rush of the tide. He is in it immediately and the current is taking him towards the narrows some mile south of us. My crew is still in the calm waters of the marina as we see that happen. Here we go!

We pull out past the line of tankers and there is no time to enjoy the scenery. I can see the tide line. The water is surging past the bow of the canoe. We are in calm water and the tide is speeding by only a few feet ahead. One more pull of the canoe and our bow is in it. We're in it. The bow turns right, too far right. My pullers are doing their job. They're responding to the force of the water by providing a force of their own. They continue to pull. It's my job to bring the bow around to the proper direction and to do that I need to pry. With John's big helmsman's paddle the job should be easy. The paddle is much larger than a normal pulling paddle and its deeper, wider blade allows the canoe to respond much quicker than with a normal paddle. That is a comfort in such water.

I respond to the sudden change of direction by prying on the left side of the canoe. I can't believe how powerful the current is. The bow is barely responding. I pull harder on the pry and the canoe begins to respond.

"CRACK!"

I'm now holding two pieces of a helmsman's paddle. The handle is in my right hand and the blade is in my left hand. The canoe is bow first into the calmer water and we're pointing north, the wrong way. The crew is wondering what the hell is going on but knowing the potential of this water they just keep paddling. I yelled out to them what had happened and to keep pulling. Putting the two broken pieces in the canoe in front of me I now took my own paddle to do the job. I was afraid that it too would break under the stress of the current. Chris's canoe had seen what had happened and had returned to render assistance. We now had our canoe under control in calmer water but surely weren't going to be safe using my paddle. From Chris's canoe came a spare helmsman's paddle and I was in business again. As we pulled out this time into the current I again had to fight the bow but this time the paddle stayed in one piece. Once fully into the current our canoe was fine. We pulled along the shore using back eddies to our advantage and our short pull to the Narrows was incident free.

As we approached the narrows I could see the others. Most of the Tribal Journeys canoes were there. We weren't the last vessels but certainly within the last 5 or 6. The Narrows were on our left as we pulled along the shore. The water surged past us as it came through the narrows. From our low vantage point we could see the boils and swirls of this narrow gap. Only about 1/4 mile wide, the water from the lower half of Vancouver Island pushes through this gap as the tides change. We would never manage to pull against it even if we tried, and at this time it was on the wane. Slack tide, that time between tides when the water is still, is about an hour away. We are planning on waiting until that slack tide to pull out and rush through the gap. The group of waiting canoes is rafted up in a small bay created by a rock jutting from the shore. They are resting in the calm water able to watch the narrows and judge the moment, wait for just the right time. Our tide books told us we had an hour to wait but the human eye and years of experience on the part of many of the helmsmen will be the best judge.

As we rafted in the sun we enjoyed listening to each other's songs and stories. It was a

very relaxing time but always a wary eye was watching the gap. Time passed at a reasonable pace there that day but nobody wasn't aware of the narrows beside us. The songs helped. The eagle soaring overhead helped. The group helped. How dangerous was this going to be? It would surely take all of our energy. I'm certainly glad my paddle broke up at the marina rather than in the teeth of Seymour Narrows.

The Campbell River tribe had sent their canoe to meet us. They came with the tide through the gap at about 20 minutes before slack tide. It was a big canoe of some 40 feet or more. It was perhaps the most beautiful canoe of all in the Journey. They would lead us through the gap when it was safe, take us to their shores and join us for the rest of the trip to Victoria. They rafted with us for a short time.

"It's time!" the skipper of the Campbell River canoe called out.

One by one the canoes pulled out. We had been facing north. We turned right into the channel and headed south through the most dangerous piece of water on the entire west coast of North America.

Within 5 minutes we were through the gap. The water was completely calm. There were no whirlpools, swirls, boils or roils. Our timing had been perfect. It was a letdown to all of us. We had wanted the challenge and it was nothing. Brains, experience and a forecast of slack tide had beat the gap of Seymour Narrows and even as we paddled we were picking up speed. The tide was now changing and flowing with us. Behind us the Narrows were awakening and realizing that they had missed us. The Narrows were now alive and awake again as the tide waters that only an hour before had rushed north, were pushing back south again. The Narrows spit the water through its gap but for us there was no danger. We were all through and in fact the tide pushing at our sterns was now taking us even quicker towards our destination of Campbell River.

That would be the last day for Cecil and Sally Hill and the Western Spirit. We'd say goodbye at the Big House that night....."The evening was filled with great dances and songs. The speeches were long but all were worth listening to and then as the evening drew to a close John Grant took the floor and called Cecil and Sally Hill to the floor. This had been their last day with us and Cecil was presented with a paddle signed by the entire VisionQuest crew. Sally was given a beautiful bouquet of flowers which our friend Fran had donated from her flower shop and they were thanked profusely by all of the VisionQuest crew for their help and friendship. We were going to miss these two. They had become a huge part of our family.

Campbell River to Comox

Today was a day I wasn't in the canoe. Rather, it was a day of driving, setting up camp and the like. Such days, while still rewarding and a necessary part of the journey, usually didn't provide the emotional gifts of actually being in the canoe. A few paragraphs from my journal read like this....."On arriving in Comox we find the reserve and are directed to the field that will be our home for the night. A group of us set

up the tents, that takes only minutes now we're so good at it, and we set out the gear on the grass awaiting the canoes. A quick stroll around the grounds shows us a very small "Big House", the smallest we'll see on the journey. There is no way all of us will fit in this structure, not even all the pullers could fit in there let alone the community and public.

I had time for a sleep in the afternoon, about an hour, then I loaded my camera and went to the beach to await the 2:30PM arrival. The beach was right across the road, the tide was a long way out and the tidal flats were muddy and messy. The road had been closed to accommodate the crowds and there were about 1200 people waiting, but where were the canoes?.....The canoes were very late that day. It was at least 5:30PM before they showed up. The crowd had diminished to 1,000 by the time they came in but it was still an impressive show. The low tide meant that the water was like a river coming out onto the tidal flats. The canoes had to ply their way slowly up past the crowd and the silhouettes of the canoes and pullers against the glacier and the low sun gave the opportunity for some good photos.

Comox to Qualicum

During the entire journey we would use our sails only a few times, and once only for any amount of time. That would be today....."Before we left that morning we had done something unique. We did something that we'd only do once on my Journey. We put the sailing mast into the canoe. I had been shown at the factory how to rig the gear. Long ago the native people had used sails when the opportunity presented itself so we weren't cheating. We were in fact imitating. The mast lies down the center of the canoe and the spar and sail fold up with it. It actually lies in the front quarter of the canoe with the mast lying in a groove at the bow of the canoe. When you are at the helm, with no mast in its position, you use that groove as the "sight" to line up the canoe for steering. The lines are pre strung through runners and it awaits the time that the wind is appropriate. With no keel we are restricted to winds that blow from our backs and we can control the canoe and steer it if that wind is up to thirty degrees on either side of our backs, any more than that and we have to drop the sail. We had tried it only one day in practice when we first got the sail and the wind had been too weak. We had merely practiced rigging it but had not had the opportunity to actually let the wind push us along. False Creek would not be the venue for our first sailing, the waters between Comox and Qualicum would be and that would be today.

We paddled for about an hour before we found the wind. Traveling south, paralleling Vancouver Island, we found wind that may work for us. It was pushing directly into our backs. Ken Williams was at our helm today, John had taken the day out of the canoe to do some Tribal Journeys stuff. We found ourselves in waves about a foot to a foot and a half high and the odd whitecap. There were no clouds in the sky and the mid morning sun was warm. We all felt great in terms of our paddling but we were anxious to give the sheets a try.

"Let's let the wind do the work for a while." someone said, and that was all it took.

The paddles were out of the water and into the canoe and the rigging was completed. Barb and Tanya had the job of actually setting the sail up as it is situated right at the bow. The rigging was hoisted and there we were with a big white sail in front of us. It immediately spread and embraced the breeze. Tanya and Barb couldn't paddle as the lines got in their way so as the rest of us started up again, they arranged life preservers and simply lay back in the sun. We paddled with the wind for about an hour and we made great time. Barb and Tanya relaxed and slept. It was a change, something different, and the time flew by as fast as our canoe flew down the coast. The sun got higher and the wind picked up even more. It's time for us to relax too.

With the exception of Ken at the helm, we all stowed our paddles in the canoe and within the restricted confines that the canoe gives us, we all relaxed. The wind carried us at about 7 to 10 knots as a passing power boat that was acting as support for one of the native canoes timed us. It was a time of reflection, laughter and total indulgence. We felt like we were cheating but in a delightful way. This was just too easy, too luxurious. Mark and Dave kept us all laughing for an hour and the ladies slept and sunbathed.

There was nobody behind Dave and I today in the canoe. I can't recall where Lloyd was and the other seat, the one that used to have Matt in it, was usually filled with a relief puller. It was an empty seat behind Dave and I and only the helmsman was there two seats back. I looked over my shoulder and figured there was a place for me. Steadying the canoe, I stood and stepped over the thwart. I got into the seat behind and then wriggled down onto the deck of the canoe. My feet ended up resting in the gunwale hanging out of the starboard side, my butt was on the deck and my head was resting on a life jacket on the port side of the canoe. For all intents and purposes I had made myself a bed in a very unlikely place. I was comfortable though, relaxed and comfortable. I pulled my Tilley hat over my eyes to guard against the bright sun and there I was enjoying the moment like someone who rolls fine wine around their mouth to savor every tasty drop.

Everyone was quiet now simply enjoying where we were. The wind pushing the canoe was silent. We were dancing with the wind, in perfect time. The waves lapped and tapped a rhythm on the side of the canoe and there was no other sound. It was a time for the mind to reflect and I did that. What a special time of my life. What a special Journey. This was as many had said it would be "The Trip of a Lifetime!". I was taking nothing for granted, rather I was trying to etch every sound and emotion into my brain in a sensuous feast. The sun, the waves and the rockabye canoe did their job. I drifted off to sleep in a contented moment. I slept for about an hour and my brain and body indulged in the most tranquil time of the entire Journey. I felt so assured in the canoe, so relaxed and at home. In its embrace I am not exaggerating when I say that at that particular moment the canoe felt more like a cradle than a boat. The Journey stood still. It imprinted during that hour. That time will forever be one of the touchstones of fond memory. The cradle rocked and I rested in complete trust and calm.

I awoke to words from someone on board. The wind had died considerably by that time and it was appropriate to pull the sail down and pull the canoe in the old fashioned way.

The other crew would try unsuccessfully to sail tomorrow but with light breezes they would not enjoy the luxury that we had indulged in. This would be the only time on the entire Journey when the canoe would actually sail for any extended period of time.

Later that day, after the celebrations on shore, the feast, the speeches and songs, I was in for yet another unforgettable moment in Journeys '97....."That evening, after the ceremonies, I found some of the nicest sunset pictures I would see on the Journey. From the beach I photographed a greeting totem on the beach and I got a couple of great shots of Melanie (my daughter who had found a couple of days off from her job in Victoria and been able to come up and visit Joy and I, and her boyfriend Noel) and Noel. Those few moments were some of the very few when the "artist" came alive in me on the trip.

We walked back to camp in the darkness and enjoyed a hot chocolate. It was time for bed. I heard drums and singing, loud boisterous singing. I had to see what it was. I walked down the campground a ways to the south then out onto the beach. There was a circle of perhaps 200 young people in a tight circle around a roaring campfire. They were all singing a lively song and watching something at the circle's center. I found a log to stand on and stretched to have a glimpse over the crowd. There seated on the ground were two groups of people, about 8 or 10 in each group. Someone was drumming the tune for the singing and the group on the ground was playing "Lahal". This indian gambling game is played with a small painted stick that is held hidden in a player's hand. To the beat of the music the player moves his or her hands back and forth in front of their body or behind their body. The object of the game is for the opposition team to designate one of their team to guess which hand the stick is in. When the guessing is done the winner of the bet receives long sticks from the opposition. These 18 inch sticks are stuck into the sand in front of the winning team and the game goes on. When the team guesses correctly which hand the Lahal stick is in that team then receives the stick and has their turn at trying to fool the other team. These kids were having fun in a major way. The beaming faces lit by the campfire told of the joy and energy they were feeling. There was laughter and smiles everywhere. These people were absorbed in the moment of joy that only friendship, a fire and the out of doors can bring. The smile of contentment on my face must have been as wide as theirs. I had come down with Chris Cooper and he too was beaming. We watched for about 10 minutes and then left these people to their happy, ancient game.

I had a motive in leaving the game when I did. I wanted to get back and into my sleeping bag before the game was over. I wanted to be rocked to sleep one more time today. This time it would be to the drums. My day had been a sensual one and I had enjoyed every minute of it. I went to sleep quickly but other thoughts were on my mind. Through all of this happiness of the day I had had several people speak to me of their frustration and concern about the lack of organization that we were experiencing. We were late for everything it seemed. Plans changed from hour to hour and there was little communication from the bosses to the pullers. I wasn't alone in my frustration. Though I went to sleep to the lullaby of those drums, they also beat a foreboding rhythm. I would have to say something soon. I would have to address the issue of leadership and

organization and I didn't look forward to that. Sleep was a welcome friend again that night.

Qualicum to Nanoose

Only a few times during the journey did I find time for the artist in me to stir. In spite of the beautiful landscape and seascape surrounding me at all times, my focus was usually in other directions. This morning, alone for a beach walk, I'd find another of those moments....."It was time for the pipes again. We were all to be up at 6:00AM and we were all together. The tents of our camp were all in one place and the tents of the remainder of Tribal Journeys were close. We all had to be up to get on the water at the same time so I wasn't worried about bothering others. I wandered around our field campsite with the ghetto blaster doing its job and our day had begun. Later I had some of the native people ask if I could do that every day. They enjoyed my Scottish alarm clock.

The ladies had a good breakfast going in short order and while it was being prepared I took the time to do a bit of photography. I wandered down to the line of canoes on the grasses of the beach. The tide was out a bit and the clear sky had a few lines of cloud bright with the morning sun's earliest rays. I photographed the canoes and their profiles in various compositions before the sun showed its face. Once the sun is up I lose the perfect light for such shots so as soon as it peeked over the hills and lit up the ocean I turned to leave. It was then that I noticed the feather on the bow of Skookum Kalitan. It was glowing in the brilliant morning sun. Every fibre and frond of the feather hanging from its bow was alive in vibrant color. My artist's heart jumped. I had only seconds before it would be lost. I positioned myself down low beside the canoe, hiding the lens from the sun itself, and I shot about 10 frames of the feather. Each one was done in a different way and each one gave me a chance at the perfect shot. Later, when the slides were developed, I found that almost all of them had value. One in particular was great in my eye and it has found its place in the best of the best show of slides of the trip. Another artist's minute had given me some reward on this morning. Now, back to the work of the day.

There was lots of fun and laughter on the trip. With that many people and so much to do, confusion was our constant friend. We found ourselves on a beach, changing into red serge to paddle a short pull across to Nanoose Bay where a large crowd was waiting....."It was time to lift the canoes back into the water. In the time we had been there the tide had dropped enough that the canoes were high and dry. Someone called for help and a group of us headed that way. At about that time I heard my portable radio with a familiar voice. It was Ron Peterson asking to talk to someone on the beach. As I was on the beach and the only one with a radio that I could see I responded. Ron asked me what time we were expected to arrive in Nanoose. We could see our landing site about a mile and a half from us across the bay but I had no idea what time we were expected there. By now I was at the stern of the canoe getting ready to lift it into the water with the others. There were about a dozen of us flanking the vessel on both sides waiting for the lift. Everyone was waiting for me to deal with the radio request. John was

across from me at the stern so I asked him when he expected to be into Nanoose. He told me perhaps a half hour or so. It was now my job to relay the message to Ron. I called him on the radio and there was no reply. I called a second time, only this time I called a little louder in the hopes of him hearing me. Ron answered but his reply sounded more lifelike than radio generated. I looked to the bow of the canoe and there stood Ron. We had been talking by radio only feet apart. He had assumed that I was on the beach in Nanoose and I had assumed that he was somewhere else calling us on the beach on which we stood. We all had a good laugh over the incident but it really was indicative of just how little we actually saw of each other on the Journey. we were all too busy with our own tasks, going about our duties.

Later in the day I would be driven up to the hall for the feast. Robby and Marie Craig, friends who live in the area, had stopped by to say hi. Only Philip Lincoln, (Philip is a native puller who had joined us earlier in the trip. He's actually from the Kitimat area) and I were at the camp at that time and the hall was a good mile and a half away, up a steep hill. We happily accepted an offer for a ride. At the time I was 48 years old, certainly I wasn't "feeling" old. I guess I looked older than I felt....."The hall that was being used for the feast was at the back of a relatively new and modern looking building of one floor. There was not a parking space to be had and as Robby wasn't staying, even though they would have been more than welcome, he merely dropped us at the front door. As it turned out the lineup for the meal was at least an hour and a quarter long. The meal was a good one of more contemporary food as it was merely catered but it was plentiful. The lineup though was long and tiresome. Some of our crew were at the very end of the lineup with at least an hour yet before they would get to eat. I couldn't see that from the front of the hall but it would all become abundantly clear to me as we entered the hall.

As we stopped in the car Philip got out immediately. I was taking a moment to be sure and say an appropriate goodbye to my friends. I heard Philip ask the woman directing traffic at the front door where the lineup was. She told Philip to go around the building to the left and the lineup would be found there. Philip was hungry and heading for the lineup, no matter how long it was.

I now stepped out of the back seat of the car and the woman immediately called to Philip.

"I'm sorry!" she said to Philip "You can go in here, I didn't know you were with an elder!" and with that she ushered us in the front door of the building. She gave us instructions as to how to find the hall and there we were. We had been let in because of my stately and wise appearance. We walked down the hallway to the entrance of the hall, not the rear entrance like everyone else, we were at the front entrance, the one for the elders. We were ushered to the front of the line and Philip and I ate immediately. I could see others from the team way back in the lineup and I avoided eye contact. I'd get my meal first. A fine meal it was too. Age has its benefits.

Nanoose to Nanaimo

It was a gorgeous day of pulling from Nanoose to Nanaimo. People greeted us from every beach and point. Homes with decks over the ocean were full of cheering parties and groups. But as we approached Nanaimo a surprise awaited us....."For the last few days the Tribal Journeys crews and ours had really warmed to each other. We were sharing pullers, laughing and enjoying each other and always looking for someone's gear in the water so we could make them dance at that night's feast. Of late the order of the day had been water fights. We had heard of many such wars but had only felt the friendly spray a few times and those were brief encounters. Our canoe was so much faster than the others that we could hit another canoe and be gone even before they could retaliate. They were about to get us back though.

We could hear the talk and see the positioning happening. Their huge canoes were moving into advantageous positions and the charge was on. The three VisionQuest canoes were their targets and in they came. We dodged and maneuvered but their sheer numbers meant that we were to get soaked. Our best defense now was to fight back so with our swift canoe we charged them. Some of us would use our paddles to spray water, others would fill bailing buckets as quickly and as full as they could and throw the contents at and into the opposing canoe. The battle raged for at least half an hour. Our conditioning played a big part in it all as we dodged and charged. All of us, the dugouts and our canoes, demonstrated our abilities. Our canoes weigh only 450 lb. but some of the dugouts weigh a ton and a half. We all moved around each other like a choreographed dance team. The crowds on the shore were cheering at the moves and victories and we were all having fun. As another unwitting canoe would round the corner coming our way they were immediately ambushed and taken into the fray. By the time we were done there must have been twenty five canoes engaged in the Battle of Nanaimo Harbour. Exhausted more from laughter than pulling, the canoes began to pull away and head further into the harbour. It was the greatest battle of the entire Journey, and nobody won. On that hot day we all sure felt the better for being a part of it, and those people on the decks, they got a unique look at Tribal Journeys and VisionQuest's Journeys '97. I'm sure they'll never forget us. I'd sure like to see some of their photographs of that great battle.

That night, in a huge Big House that looked more like a big barn than the traditional Long Houses we had been visiting, I'd experience one of the most emotional cultural moments of the journey for me....." That night there was the usual singing, dancing, speeches and presentations. It was a relatively short evening that saw us out of the hall by midnight. One very memorable moment for me though came part way through the evening. The Tribal Journeys group had a theme song that they sang as a group at each stop. I never did actually learn all of the words to it but I could sing along by now and pick up most of it. The native words are all so subtle and throaty that I'm sure I was merely singing what I thought I heard rather than the accurate rendition. At any rate, I enjoyed their song. It had a rousing beat and rhythm and was particularly effective with drums. On this particular night the song started in the middle of the dirt floor. There must have been 250 native people on the floor in a tight circle all balled up

around a lone drummer. The singing was particularly powerful as they went into the Tribal Journeys theme song and I was caught up in the energy and emotion of it all. I was sitting at the end of the barn with Joy, Farrah and Gary Spence. I got up and walked quickly to become part of the ball of singing people on the dirt floor. I had to get closer to this unusually strong energy. I sang the song as I walked and when I got to the back of the circle I found a place with shorter people and I stretched on tip toes to see over the crowd. There at the center of the circle was a native man of classic native features. He looked more Algonquin than Coastal. He was at least 6 foot 4 inches tall, perhaps 35 years old. He had long dark black braided hair. It was a single braid that hung down the center of his back. He wore a long sleeved shirt of burgundy and blue jeans and a leather vest that was open. The crowd was fixated by him and the drum that he pounded and I immediately became a part of it. This man drummed and sang such that he could be heard over the entire crowd. He drove the padded drumstick into the drum with power and purpose and the entire barn moved at the rhythm. The crowd danced on the spot, their bodies driven by his pounding. I was part of it all. The smiles on faces told of the joy that we all felt in our souls at that time. The energy was contagious and the drumming went on. The song had never been sung with such power before and never again would I hear any rendition that would even come close. When the final stroke hit the drum there was no mistaking that it was meant to be the last. I was sure that the power that the drummer hit it with would have split the skin. With the song over the crowd erupted into applause and cheering such that you'd think they had just witnessed a World Series winning home run and a Stanley Cup winning goal all at the same time. I cheered as loudly as anyone. That had been something. I turned and walked back to my friends. I felt a sense of exhaustion. That few minutes had demanded a lot of energy. The drum had demanded a price from that crowd. It had cost a lot of emotion, energy and spirit. I'll never forget that song, that singer and that drumming. The beat will forever be in my head whenever I need to find yet another touchstone of that wonderful July of 1997.

Nanaimo - a day off

I suppose it's significant that, on this day off in the big city, I can find nothing in my journal that I feel is important to the story of Journeys '97. I suppose in retrospect, it was a day back in the real world. Already I was missing the culture and emotion of the journey itself and I couldn't wait to get the canoes moving again.

Naniamo to Ladysmith (Kulleet Bay)

When you are pulling in a canoe and you drop a piece of gear overboard you pay a price. The native people taught us quickly that you had to pay a price to get a paddle back, or a hat....." That night at the ceremonies the Bella Bellas were called into the center of the floor. One of their pullers had lost their hat during the day and another canoe had recovered it. The Bella Bellas had to dance to gain the hat back for their puller. This is always in good fun and provided lots of laughs for those watching from the sidelines. Of course when the Bella Bellas were called to dance their favorite adopted son (my adoption in 1981 by Maggie Windsor means that I must take part with the Bella

Bellas any time they are called upon as a group) was called up to take part. I gratefully accepted and in my yellow VisionQuest coat I danced for the hat. Little did I know that I'd remember that hat and that dance in a few days from now. Though it was fun, one went to every effort and end to avoid having to dance for a paddle, hat or other piece of personal belongings.

Kulleet Bay to Cowichan/Duncan

"We have 22 miles to pull today, a good pull and one I'm looking forward to. We are not into the second last pull that I will do and I want to enjoy every stroke of the day. The wind was up on that sunny day so we had to fight a chop for at least half of the day. What a pull. We pulled non stop until lunch time. We found a great shallow beach to pull up on, a beach loaded with oysters and mussels. Our bag lunch of ham and cheese sandwiches and our ever present Poweraide provided us with a perfect meal on that day. Our break was perhaps 3/4 of an hour and we were off again. Other than a 5 minute break on the Therapy, we paddled non stop. Our lunch break and the pee break were the only times we stopped all day. We are by now in such good shape that we didn't want to stop. We pulled long and hard until 4:00PM. Matt and Dave were in fine form. I'd pull a power 100 and they'd join in, then the others. The next ten minutes would pass and I'd notice the pull of the canoe speed up. Now one of them was initiating a power 100. This time I'd join in and support them. We pulled and powered ahead of the entire fleet even without realizing it. One particular area of the pull is particularly memorable. We came to a bay with two huge markers a mile or so out in the water. Our course was to go around those markers as they warned of extremely shallow water. Our course would take us directly into the teeth of the wind. The waves were 3 feet or more in height and the whitecaps were breaking and spraying into the canoe. Periodically one of us would have to stop pulling simply to bail out the canoe. We were taking on more water here than we did going around Cape Caution. It was here that we pulled our best and hardest of the day. We had an hour and a half of intense work to do. It was simply heads down and pull. We charged those waves and challenged the wind. We pulled with more than determination. We pulled with the welled up emotion of the trip energizing us. We knew this would be one of the last "adventures" of the trip and we wanted to make the most of it. We even pulled several power 100's into the face of the wind. I think that day we could have pulled our canoe UP Niagara Falls. We all agreed later, the entire canoe, that we were high that day. We were pulling in another zone. It would be one of the top days of pulling in terms of how we felt and how we worked together. We were the first canoe into our staging area where we were to change into red serge.

We got to the staging area, some 22 miles from where we had started at 10:30 that morning, so far ahead of everyone else that we were laying out in the sun on the rocks and grass when they got there. The staging area we used is a Boy Scout park area so it was well appointed with docks, beach, lawns and the like. This was luxury. We savored the memory of a great day of pulling. It had been one of the best.

That day was to also bring a very emotional moment to me. Sitting in the hall that night I

was dog tired. I was staying until the end of the festivities but I found myself helplessly nodding off to sleep sitting in my chair....."I am tired on this night and in spite of the good entertainment I long for my sleeping bag. It is only a few steps away out in that field and it beckons to me. I could leave and nobody would notice. I'm nodding by now, but I stay. Thankfully I stay. The night is late. We are now into speeches and the like. I'm not taking all of this for granted, but I have heard it before. I'm nodding and fighting the urge to leave. A woman comes to the microphone at the center of the gym. The hall is noisy with about 500 people left, some have answered the urge to leave. When she takes the microphone she immediately asks for Roy Vickers and Ed Hill to come forward. I thought I heard my name in my drowsy drooping state and Joy confirmed it. I snapped awake realizing that I was being called up front and center. I walked to the woman who I had never met before and didn't recognize. Roy and I arrived at about the same time. Her name turned out to be Lucy Swityk and she wanted to talk about Roy and me. She is a recovering alcoholic and now she wants to publicly recognize and thank us for what we have done to help her and her people. She has watched our work and progress for many years now and with this opportunity of us coming to her community, she now wants to thank us publicly and encourage us to keep up the battle and struggle that is VisionQuest. With that she presents each of us with woven cedar baskets that her mother has made especially for Roy and me . Plainly visible on the basket is the form of a canoe and pullers. She wants us to always know of her gratitude and of her mother's gratitude and she hopes that her meagre gift will find a prominent place in our homes. It's our turn to speak now.

What timing! How did she know I needed a lift on this day! While the pulling had been great, the weight within me had been growing daily. What timing! What a coincidence!

I find a few emotional words of surprise and humble thanks. The words come with a struggle between gulps and swallows. This has taken me. My day of perfect pulling has finished with a presentation of perfect words at a perfect time. What a gift Lucy gave me that day, not the basket, that was great, but the words were greater. What timing!

I handed the mic to Roy and he nodded thanks to Lucy through his tears. He mumbled something over the mic, something that sounded like "Thank you" and he could say no more. He put the mic back on its stand and we both hugged this lady of impeccable timing. I have since written her a thank you letter yet still can't find appropriate words to fully tell of my emotions that day. What timing!

Duncan to Saanich

Chris Cooper is a professional guide, on water and on land. He and his company, Wilderness Adventures Unlimited, can provide you with virtually any adventure you can dream up. He's a professional and he provided a lot of help and learning for all of us, particularly in the skills of handling these big canoes on rivers. I give 100% credit to Chris and his teaching. Without him, I never would have been able to take the helm and make it up the Whonnock River back at Owikeeno. On this day Tony Mahon and I were in the Zodiac as support. We were following Chris and his crew as they pulled up the

shore and through some islands towards Sydney Harbour. That said, this is a story that just has to be told. I hope time passed will allow Chris to enjoy it too....."We were following the last canoe, Chris's. The tide was running against Chris but he wasn't involving his crew in any unnecessary pulling. He chose the back eddy that was going his way along the shore of the island. His crew was enjoying the day and the pull. The going was easy. They had Fara, the singer who sings our theme song of "River of Love", and as such they had sung their way for most of the 4 or 5 hours of pulling that they had already done. The reflection of their canoe found itself in my camera lens more than once as it slid along that rocky shore. Chris was perched in proud confidence at the helm of the canoe and his pullers were gaining major water with each pull of their paddles. This is what paddling is all about. All pulls should be this beautiful and perfect.

"SCHKRUCH!"

Chris's canoe came to a full and complete STOP. They were no further than 15 feet from shore in what looked like perfect, deep, water. The back eddy was smooth, dark and fully running. It gave no hint. Chris's canoe however, had found the one finger of rock that had poked its craggy tip to within 4 inches of the surface. The canoe hull had hit it perfectly, dead center. They were high and dry and Chris was flustered and flabbergasted. He immediately began giving directions to the stunned crew. Things had been going so well and now this! About 4 of the crew jumped from the canoe on the right side. They lifted, pried and pulled. A few more would have to get out. Two more got out and there was more lifting and jostling of the vessel. Finally it budged and with one final lift and shove it was free. The disembarked crew clambered back in and they were off, almost as if nothing had happened. I had been watching though and when I'm in the Zodiac I always have my camera with me. I'm proud to say that I have about a half dozen finely focused photographs of this historic event. One has even found its way into the "official" slide show and is the subject of great fun and laughter each time it's shown.

Saanich to Esquimalt

As I read my journal trying to find some excerpt to include in this presentation I find myself reading the entire chapter. What a powerful, emotional day. It was our last real day of pulling on the journey and the significance of that was lost to none of us.....""Paddles up!" the usual words from John at the helm.

"Take 'er away!"

I will always remember our first 8 or 10 pulls on that day. The order was given and we pulled - together. Usually it would take one or two pulls to find the pace, to work with each other. Today it was immediate. The canoe lifted and glided from the very first pull. There was no sound. Nobody was talking, we were all "feeling". We were remembering. Within seconds we were at cruising speed, the only sound the dipping of ten paddles in unison. The water was glass smooth so even the bow made no sound as it knifed and sliced the still waters.

The charted course from Saanich around to Esquimalt is figured to be 22 miles. The organizers of Tribal Journeys in planning today had figured in potential winds and tides and for the largest canoes they estimate that today's trip will require up to twelve and a half hours of pulling. We will basically take a southern bearing until we reach the bottom of Vancouver Island, then we'll turn right and head west to our destination just past the entrance to Victoria Harbour.

The canoe slid on the surface. It was almost too easy. As we pulled out of the harbour area the vast expanse of water now exposed itself to us. We experienced only the gentlest of ground swells and we powered in perfect time towards our goal. There was no pain, no exhaustion, no lapses of the brain. There was only pleasure in every pull. Of all of our paddles this was perhaps the most silent of them all. We did talk and laugh, there was lots of that, but there was lots of silence too. There was a lot of thinking going on here. All the while the canoe slipped silently towards its goal and there was only the sound of ten paddles dipping in unison.

About an hour and a half into the paddle John asked if anyone needed a break. In the same unison as we were pulling there was a universal "no" from all of us. The canoe kept going. It was only after two hours that John asked us to stop for some photo opportunities with our escort boat of the day, the RCMP vessel "Lindsay". With that done we were off again. We didn't need a rest, particularly today. They could point us towards Hawaii today and we'd make it. At noon we found a rocky island off Oak Bay. We pulled in and ate some sandwiches as we relaxed on the rocks in the sun. We didn't stop for long though. We had places to go, a paddle to do. When we got back into the canoe though our perfect water had changed. Now the tide was running against us. As we pulled along the posh waterfront properties of Greater Victoria we had to fight tide runs and rips. Now our pulling was truly tested one last time. At times our pulling would advance the craft only a foot or two, now timing was everything. We loved it. Bring on some more. This is what we do. But this is the last time we'll do it. That thought kept sneaking back into my brain. The harder I pulled the closer the tears came to my eyes. With every foot we gained that day the closer the end was coming.

At one point, as we approached a point just before Gordon Head, Chris' canoe was about a quarter of a mile ahead of us. They were going to reach the point first. Matt Vickers saw this and called to the rest of us "Let's beat them to the point!".

"Three, two, one!" the standard preface to a power pull. This was our cadence signal and preparation to 100% effort. Normally it would be a Power 20, a Power 50 or a Power 100. The leader of the pull would call that number out and with that you had a goal of how far you would have to give that supreme effort. In your mind you could rationalize the pain and sacrifice of the pull. This time it was different. Matt didn't give us a goal, other than the point of land that we could all see before us. We'd try to beat Chris's canoe and we'd do it with as many pulls as it would take.

The canoe lifted and responded in powerful and smooth surges. Everyone was in perfect time. We were leaving a wake that a motor vessel would envy. As we pulled I

found my gaze fixed on the back of the puller ahead of me and I could hear Matt's voice numbering each pull.

"One hundred and thirty, thirty one, thirty two...." I kept pulling, each stroke as perfect as I could make it. Each pull with 100% effort.

"Two hundred and fifty, fifty one, fifty two..." we all kept driving, pulling, straining and working. The canoe slid and surged forward.

"Three hundred and eleven, twelve, thirteen..." Matt's voice kept up its relentless chant in the back of my head. Pull, pull, pull. Harder, harder, harder. Timing, remember the perfect timing.

"Three hundred and fifty eight, fifty nine, sixty... Stop!" that didn't mean "stop", that only meant drop back to normal paddling cadence. We looked up to see that Chris's canoe had beat us by a considerable margin around the point. The quarter mile had been just too much to make up. That didn't matter though. We had just done a "Power 360". We had "peaked" in fitness, form, dedication, style, determination and focus. The exercise had not been to beat Chris, it had been to do it right one last time. It had been our unconscious effort at perfection just this one time on the Journey, and we had done it. Our physical condition was such that we could have done it again in a minute. We felt a pride and sense of accomplishment at that time that I hope I feel again someday in my life. Only four short months ago a Power 20 would leave us doubled over in the canoe gasping for air and flexing our shoulders to ease the pain. There was none of that today, only the wonderful feeling of achievement, the glow of "being able". As we rounded the point we could see the breakwater, that famous landmark of Victoria at Gordon Head. We would stop there for a coffee, a latte! How conditions had changed. We approached the rocky beach at Gordon Head, none of us realizing its significance. That would hit us all in a few minutes.

Royal Roads - The Concert

A concert on the grounds of Royal Roads had been organized by a lot of people. I'll name none of them because I'll probably miss one. Suffice to say that those who did this job did a GREAT JOB. This was a first class event held at a first class venue. There is one story however, that brings me back to the spirit and purpose of this trip. Remember back at Owikeeno? Remember the lost coat and the bear? That story will come full circle tonight at the concert....."At about 10:30PM Lloyd Norman asked to see me alone. He was the member that had lost his yellow VisionQuest coat from the canoe back in Owikeeno.

He told me that he had been approached by the Owikeenos. They had come over in the dark from Esquimalt to our event. They had found Lloyd in the crowd and asked to see him alone. He had walked with them down into the parking lot area where about a dozen of them were waiting for him. Surrounding him one had spoken up telling him that their village had lost face when his coat had disappeared. The village had therefore

taken up a collection and wanted him to have money for his coat. They handed him \$200.00 in cash. That evening the bill they said, now, to gain proper favor back they wanted to present him with a gift and at that they handed him a ceremonial paddle like no paddle I have ever seen before. It was adorned with painting and design of impeccable quality and the shaft was hung with long strands of blonde and brown horse hair. It had to be a piece of art worth close to a thousand dollars. Now the Owikeenos felt good again about the visitors they had had. Lloyd was so emotional about the whole thing that he could barely talk. Owikeeno seemed so far away, so distant, both in water miles and time. He had written the coat off as a good story but these people needed to feel good again about the visitors that they had had. Lloyd had pulled me aside to ask if I would publicly thank and recognize the Owikeenos. I of course agreed but would do so only with the permission of their chief, my old friend Ted Walkus.

Victoria Harbour

We were here. Victoria Harbour had been our goal. I was anticipating a huge emotional charge on my part....."The four canoes managed to get into the water without incident on the sloped concrete ramp and nobody got their high brown boots wet, that in itself was a miracle. We were all in red serge, native regalia or the yellow VisionQuest coat depending on who we were and what was appropriate. The Commissioner and Deputy Proke both proudly wore their newly acquired necklaces on the outside of their serges. For the only time of the Journey we wore our stetsons rather than our forage caps. I suppose we were a very impressive sight. For the most part we were hot and uncomfortable. Thankfully the paddle in, about a half mile, was at a very slow and controlled pace.

We paddled together in the calm harbour water. We stayed with all bows in a row as we passed moored boats with cheering people. Almost immediately after leaving the Coast Guard station we saw people waiting on the boardwalks and areas along the shore. Everyone clapped and cheered and yelled encouragement. It was a time full of pride and a sense of accomplishment. Somewhere in that crowd I knew my son, Bryson, who had come over late yesterday and been at part of the concert, was in the crowd. So too were both of my parents. I was so proud of the fact that they were there to witness this. Back in Ontario this was a non event yet out here everyone knew of VisionQuest and the paddlers of the west coast. I was so glad, for their own sense of pride, that they were here for this. I knew the day would be difficult for them though as neither can stand for long. I certainly knew not to expect to spot them in the crowd, there would be just too many people.

As we pulled around a bit of a point the harbour came into view. I could see the Tribal Journeys canoes already in the harbour. They were among yachts and other vessels moored in the area. There were row boats and kayaks but all were staying clear of the canoes. The mix of color and motion surrounded by all those people took my breath away for a moment. I recall sitting upright even more and pulling even better. I think everyone did. We were proud of who we were and where we were on this day. This was the day I had expected to feel it. This is the day it would hit me!

As we paddled slowly towards the others we could see and hear that the ceremonies of speeches, songs and welcomes had already started. We were to be last, the place of honour, so we weren't late. We were right on time for a grand entrance. As we paddled closer to the harbour we got a sense of the size of the crowd. We were told that there were 20,000 people there. They were lined all along the shore walkway to our right. At the Wax Museum they must have been 10 deep and the crowd grew to a huge mass at the intersection across from the clock tower of the museum. All along Government street the crowd was again 10 or more deep up on the street and down on the actual walkway around the harbour the crowd was thick to the walls. Now in the harbour, I could see that the crowd was equally thick to the left of us and each vessel and boat had people standing and cheering. As we progressed the crowd swelled and cheered to us. It was like a "wave" at some ball game, growing in intensity as we came into the harbour. They knew who we were. They had been with us all the way from Hazelton and now they were here to see us finish our odyssey.

We rafted in the still air and hot sun for at least an hour as we listened to speeches we couldn't hear on the PA system and we watched as the other canoes went forward one by one or in tribal groups. We listened as they were greeted with songs and cheers. As we sat I looked around at the crowd. I marveled at the numbers, at the enthusiasm and interest. I could feel eyes on us. Our red serges commanded attention even in the stir of color that the regalia and other canoes provided. I kept waiting for the hit. I kept waiting for the swell of emotion to take over. It wasn't there yet. It would come.

As our canoes were called forward, the last group called, the crowd erupted into an ovation that was louder than any to this point in time. If they hadn't already been standing I'd describe it as a standing ovation that went on for minutes. Our few short paddle strokes took us to the point that we would hold for the ceremonies and we held the canoes. The crowd cheered on. I choked a bit on the pride of the moment and it was over. Was that the hit I had been expecting since this Journey had been conceived? Was that the emotional outburst that I had been anticipating since the canoes shoved off of that beach at K'san? I found myself listening and singing our Hi Ni Ni Oh song without any trouble. I was looking around at the crowd and enjoying the moment but the rush of tears I had expected to be there weren't.

Maybe later that day, as we entered the packed stadium to open the North American Indigenous Games, it would hit....."We were all still in our gear and each of the pullers had their paddle. Each native pulling team went in ahead of us and we could hear each being introduced as they came out from under the entrance to the track. Together and in parade fashion they all marched past the grandstand and circled the track. The idea was to create a sacred circle for the entry of the athletes. We were again last to enter the stadium with our paddles held high. John and Roy invited me to the front of our contingent. I was most grateful and immediately looked for Joy and insisted that she join me. I was proud to be at the head of our group. I choked again just a bit as we entered the stadium.

The ovation was immediate and loud and the crowd stood. Again they were letting us know that they knew who we were and how much they appreciated us. As we marched past the grandstand with paddles and arms waving I watched the crowd through foggy eyes. I could feel it but it didn't come. It passed.

Breaking Camp

It was here. The journey was over and it was time to get back to that other world. I knew myself and I knew I had emotions to get out. This had been so overpowering all of it. We had slept the night in our tent on the military grounds at the end of the Victoria Airport property. It was only Joy and I and John and Carol Grant left. Everyone else had left. Today it would happen..... I lifted the heavy flap of the tent as quietly as I could and I bent over and stepped outside. The eastern sky was a brilliant red and orange. Some bright stars were still shining. Like some button blanket wrapped around the camp, we were adorned in the beauty of yet one more perfect sunrise. The sky was bright but the campsite was still in relative darkness. The air was as still as an ocean inlet at slack tide and it was cool to the face. There was no sound, only the drums, songs and voices in my brain. I stood and took stock.

The campsite that had only 24 hours ago been a community was now bare grass. John Grant and Carol had their tent pitched way back by the fence, other than that there was nothing else. The big tent and their small igloo style tent, that was it. On the grass, about 50 yards from me was Skookum Kalitan. It lay there listing to one side. I could see that there was virtually nothing inside it. There were no water bottles awaiting today's pull. No paddles rested over the seats. No life vests sat waiting for the day. It was empty and lifeless. That friend that had been so alive and vital for a five months now was lifeless. It was an inanimate "thing", not a place of peace and happiness. I turned my head to an empty parking lot and then looked back at the canoe. IT HIT! IT HIT HARD!

The entire image before me distorted itself through welled up eyes. I lost it in a big and private way. I wandered the empty campsite and I approached my old friend, Skookum Kalitan. Dave's seat and mine were so simple. It was a piece of wood spanning a fibre glass canoe. My seat on the left, Dave's on the right, the empty stow bag beneath. It had no life. The canoe had no purpose. It was here on the grass with no place to go. There would be no power pulling today. There would be no command of "Paddles up!". There would be no uncontrolled laughter at the antics of Dave and Mark. Nobody would greet us on the shore and embrace us in their culture and warmth. There would be no traditional meal tonight. I wandered around the site in a teary trance. I photographed the empty field that used to be home to 80 people. I photographed the empty canoe against the brilliant sunrise sky and I ensured that I would long have the image of "our" seat. I even photographed our empty seat. Those images will grace the final page of any album that I put together of this Journey.

Making my way to the washrooms I washed my face. I came outside into the morning air and took one last look. I still couldn't see much through those eyes. My car was

waiting in the lot and I drove away. In downtown Sidney I found a corner store open. I pulled over and parked. A coffee would go well about now. I got out of the car and there on the wall across the street was a huge mural of a dugout canoe full of focused and powerful pullers. At the bow was one man with his paddle held high waiting for the next pull. They were negotiating some rapids and the moment was obviously an intense one for all of them. I could hear the waters of the Whonnock. I could feel the surge of the river and the intensity of the pullers. I could feel the fear, anticipation and energy of each puller in the canoe. Owikeeno was just around the corner but we could make it. The mural was alive and moving in my brain. IT HIT HARD AGAIN! I stood there on the streets of Sidney crying, alone, with no place to go, no pulling to do. This was over.

I managed to pull it together and get inside the store. Pouring a coffee I walked to the front of the store. My yellow coat with the RCMP patches caught the attention of the attendant. Recognizing that I was a member of the Force he told me the coffee was free. They were glad to have any officer in the shop at that time of the day. He next realized that I was a VisionQuest participant and asked if I had been on the canoe journey this past month. I nodded and whimpered something unintelligible. I could get no more out and left the store. I'm sure I left him wondering what kind of a fruitcake he had just given a free coffee to. I'm surprised if he didn't call the real cops to tell them of some nut who had obviously stolen a VisionQuest jacket.

I made my way to the Sydney Harbour docks on that fine morning. I sat quietly at a table on the dock outside Blaine and Henny's boat, The Toucan. Nobody was up yet. I sat with my journal and wrote the final entries. My journal finishes with these words....."The salt air and cool morning breeze on the Sidney Harbour docks that morning provided a proper conclusion. They were relevant to the sounds, sensations and emotions of the last month. I could be back there for the moment as I relived as much as I could. I knew that it would end soon with the bustle of the day. I knew that the "real world" that I had just experienced for the past month was going to quickly fade into memory and inadequate collections of photographs and memorabilia. I resolved then and there that I would return to that world again someday, but with this day breaking what had been would end. Abruptly!

"What are you doing sitting out here Ed!" It was Blaine and Henny out for their morning walk.

"Just finishing something!" I tried to say "I'm just finished!"