

AAHH! That's Bass

WORDS AND PICS FLIGHT LIEUTENANT TREVOR GRANT



Surfboats satisfy in the drink

A cold, grey, wet dawn greeted competitors for the start of the biennial Navy-sponsored George Bass Surfboat Marathon at Batemans Bay on the south coast of NSW. Competitors from all over eastern Australia were this year joined by a crew from Holland.

Surfboat rowers and surfski paddlers followed part of the route Royal Navy Commander George Bass first rowed with his crew in 1797 while exploring the east coast of Australia. Commander Bass and six sailors took a whale boat from Sydney in December 1797 and returned in February 1798 having covered some 1000km – half of which was previously unexplored.

This year's George Bass marathon started at Bateman's Bay and progressed over seven days, with competitors rowing more than 190km of the original route to Eden on the far south coast of NSW.

Navy was again the main sponsor for this event with Commander Rod Harrod, who managed the Navy team, saying it was an extremely arduous event that tested every competitor to the core of their being.

"This event tested courage, strength and teamwork – all core values of the Royal Australia Navy," Commander Harrod said.

But it's not just about the rowers. Like the competing teams, Commander Harrod had a small dedicated team of sailors who gave up their New Year break to support the

George Bass Surfboat Marathon.

He said that without the support in the background from all of the volunteers – Navy, surf-club members, Saint John Ambulance and the families of competitors – this race could not happen.

His 'beach team' of Chief Petty Officer Kel Bryant, Leading Seaman Dana Richards and Seaman Janelle Price actively engaged the large crowds that gathered on the beaches for the start and finish of each leg.

"We had lots of work to do, setting up at the start and then packing up to reset at the finish, so the crowds waiting had something to do," Commander Harrod said. "We also had a lot of fun interacting with

the kids on the beach, building sandcastles and playing some games."

Leading Seaman Dana Richards (also a member of the Shellharbour Surf Lifesaving Club) said that, as a rower, participating in the George Bass was one of those great achievements in life.

"Supporting the race is also something to be proud of and something that you will remember for the rest of your life," Leading Seaman Richards said.

Seaman Janelle Price, a former Gap Year participant, said she volunteered to help in support of this event because she has never had anything to do with the sea.

"Helping out also gave me the chance to do something new and be a part of a team," she said.

Competing was a far cry from the

dentist chair for Commander Peta Blake as a participant in this year's Surfboat Marathon.

Commander Blake, a reserve dental officer, is a member of the Bermagui Surf Lifesaving Club based on the south coast of NSW and has been involved in surfboat rowing for a number of years.

"The George Bass surfboat Marathon is one of the most gruelling events I have ever done," Commander Blake said.

"It's a real test of your inner strength, your courage, your teamwork and your determination to finish."

Rain, wind and heavy sea conditions didn't deter Commander Blake and the rest of her team from pushing on to the end though.

"I think the conditions on the first few days were so bad that most crews had some problems with seasickness, injuries and hypothermia.

"But we all kept talking to each other and our sweep kept our morale up," she said.

Summing up the race, Commander Blake said she thought the pain of rowing for seven days in arduous conditions was worse than being in the dentist chair.

"For me to not only participate, but to actually finish is great.

"I take my hat off to those original explorers who rowed from Sydney, around Tasmania and back.

"I would like to think that we [Defence] could get a men's and women's team ready for the next George Bass Surf Boat Marathon in 2012."

