

Kevin Eslinger

Photo courtesy Mike Eaton



[Chart Plot](#) *courtesy Mike Eaton*

His short story about his 70 mile paddle from San Clemente Island to San Diego (Ocean Beach.)

"Grab your board and go paddle." I had heard the engine throttle back and hadn't been sure whether we were at the island, or whether Tripp and Bob were just slowing down to put on more clothes. It had a been a cold, windy, wet and bumpy ride from Mission Bay. I had hidden the whole time under the makeshift cover I had constructed the day before out of a piece of old sailcloth. Their boat, a 21' walk around center console had nowhere to hide from the elements, and now the bow looked like a skewed Conestoga wagon. "Did you get any rest?"....."I am now. " I seriously considered asking them if I could just shut my eyes for twenty

minutes or so. The ride out was exhausting. Trying not to get airborne by pinching your cheeks together to grab a semi-inflated air mattress may put Suzanne Sommers out of a job but I hadn't gotten any of the sleep I had counted on. As I rolled out I could feel the patches of damp that had penetrated my less than perfect shelter, only to see the boys looking like they had gone through a car wash, without a car. But now it was time to paddle. No matter what.

I had attempted this paddle July of 2000, on a board that Mike Eaton had loaned me. I can honestly add to the legend of Mike's generous and gentlemanly nature by saying he did this on no other basis other than that Jay Scheckman, after seeing me complete a nine hour training paddle on an old poly-stripped/glassed-over wind surfer, asked me which door of the house I had torn down and decided to paddle. After which he had taken me to Mike's shop to introduce me, and I walked out with a board under my arm. The only other time I had ever met Mike was at the 1997 bay to bay race, where I had paddled a homemade experimental kookbox. I found out later that Mike had assigned me to team "wooden box."

"What time is it?" I asked steadying myself against both the roll of the boat and the slightest feeling of queasiness. "Oh jeez!.....Guess!" "Eleven?" "One?" "It's 2:45!" This was not the most encouraging thing to hear. We had set out at 7:30pm in the hope of a 3 to 4 hour journey. It had been more than seven miserable hours. The good news was all those bumps we fought on the way out would be pushing us in. The bad news was that the boat was full of water. The wet ride combined with the extra fuel we were carrying created a little saltwater swimming pool about six inches deep in the back of the boat. After doing a couple of high speed circles in the lee of Pyramid Point to drain the water out, I dropped my board over and slid on to it. As I sat waiting for Tripp to get the borrowed 25hp 'kicker' started I turned on my gps and the red LED bike taillight I had rigged so that I could read it in the dark without having my night vision affected. 54.8nm it read to my selected waypoint of the northern end of the tee of the Ocean Beach pier. On my board I also had a compass, a watch, a light on a short pole, a bottle with a long drinking tube and six powergel packs duct taped down so that tearing them off would open them at the same time. The small outboard, small compared to the 150 horse outboard that was the primary power, finally started and I laid down and began to paddle. My greatest fear during the ride out was about the cold, but here in the lee of the island, paddling down a silver path of moonlight with the slightest hint of breeze at my back it wasn't cold. Not even a little. After about the first twenty minutes I had noticed the sound of the outboard growing fainter, but I could see the red and green navigation light on the front of the boat, so I wasn't concerned. But now the motor stopped. As I slowed my pace, I heard the larger motor start up and it occurred to me that the little engine couldn't keep up with me even

though my goal was to hold a pace of just four knots. A four knot average would get me back to OB in less than fifteen hours.

In less than an hour my gps was showing 'battery low,' and the screen went blank not longer after. This wasn't a great concern at the time because I had a dozen fresh batteries still on the boat. So I handed it back to the boys on the boat and continued on, the light from the moon plenty to read my compass by. My normal paddling pattern is three minutes on my knees, two minutes prone, six strokes and glide. All double arm. I had figured out during training that four and glide, with some easy single arm thrown in would keep me very close to four knots with the least amount of effort. I could read my compass in the dark but not the watch mounted right next to it, so I went with the "comfort pattern." As soon as there was any discomfort in one position I switched to the other.

Paddling out of the lee of the island the bumps got a little wilder. After one particularly insignificant twitch I reached back for the tiller to correct my course (My 19 ft board has a tiller/rudder set-up that allows me to use my feet to make course changes quickly and efficiently,) at the same time I heard a garbled yell from the boat. Reaching back my foot swung at empty air. I sat up and turned around to see my light bobbing in the water 30 yards behind me. I had mounted the light on the small block of wood that controls the tiller. I had tested it in what I thought were severe conditions, but here where it was vital, it had abandoned ship. Worse than that, it had carried away the wood that made the board go straight when I wanted it to, and turn when I needed it to. The boys on the boat handed me strips of duct tape and I taped the light to the tiller, laying down now instead of standing up. And then I had no choice but to tape the tiller down so that the board would at least go straight. But that also meant that I would have to push the board around, or drag hand or foot to get it to steer. And since this would be a mostly downhill run, a significant bit of speed would be lost.

Over the course of the next three hours, as the sun slowly cracked the horizon gray and its golden light overtook the silver of the moon I handed my gps back to the boat two more times as it ate batteries. After the last time I told them to keep it, and paddled on by compass alone. From the southern tip of the island, Pyramid Point, it is almost due east to Ocean Beach. The swell and seas were primarily from the northwest, with the remnants of a south swell giving hint of its presence occasionally. To try to take advantage of this I started tacking. I would head slightly north of the course when paddling prone, and back to the course when on

my knees. I did this for two reasons actually. The first to try to get a more advantageous angle to surf the prevailing conditions. The second because the California current flows constantly southward and I didn't want to get pushed below the mark and have to go "uphill" at the end when I would be the most fatigued.

The wind that wouldn't settle down during our trip out finally did a couple of hours after sunrise. And although it never got completely glassy, it was sometimes a strange sensation to never feel any breeze, because I was moving at the same speed as the air around me. By about nine am I had finished off five of the six powergels that were taped to my board, and was halfway through my second 32 ounce bottle of liquid. And I was grooving. It had taken six hours after that lousy boat ride, but for almost the next three hours it was automatic.

Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke, glide.....! No pain, no discomfort, just a real feeling of connection with the ocean. Feeling her lift the tail of the board as the next little bump rolled under me, and juicing up the power of my strokes to try to match and catch it. This incredible rhythm was only interrupted once. And that was when during a glide sequence, I rolled over the top of a little cross chop and startled a small thresher shark that was lazing on the surface. It slapped its tail, which seemed a good three feet of its approximate seven feet, on the surface as it dove. I jumped too and paddled with just my fingertips as I watched it disappear into the deep blue.

For some reason the sense of smell seems most amplified on the ocean. I caught a whiff of something that made my mouth water. I raised my foot while paddling prone, my signal that I wished to make contact with the boat. As they approached the scent got stronger, and the thought of downing another of those frosting like gel packs forced me to ask for a cheese sandwich with whatever kind of mustard was at that point causing me to drool all over my board. That downed I continued on, but over the last half-hour before that my left shoulder started buggin'. I had hurt it earlier in the season, and I hoped that it wasn't going to get severe. I could paddle with little or no discomfort on my knees. But prone paddling hurt. So I started "fakey" paddling with my left arm when I was on my belly. And I got a handful of ice from the boat a couple of times to lay ice on it for a minute or two. The pain would subside for about 20 minutes and then slowly creep back. Ever since the sun came up the boys in the boat had a couple of fishing lines in the water. When they saw a nearby kelp patty they would run over to it and drop lines on it hoping to score whatever was beneath it. And we were for the most part alone. Most of the time I was out in front of them. Then they would come trolling up behind me doing just a couple of knots more than me. I had noticed out of the corner of my eye a dark spot on the horizon to the north. About five minutes later, as the boys came creeping up behind me Tripp

called out, "you better start flying or put the brakes on!" I looked up to see that the dark spot was now a large container ship that was moving fast. Its bow wave was a good 10 feet high and we were on a collision course. I contemplated trying to sprint across in front, and realizing that I still had more than twenty miles to go sat up and let the "Box Wave" pass about 100yds in front of me.

A little after one o'clock I noticed Bob wheel the boat around quickly. I hoped he'd spotted a fruitful kelp patty because they hadn't had any luck so far. And even though I'd tried to warn them that escorting a long event like this was about as exciting as watching grass grow, I knew they were bored when I spotted Tripp reading. Which of course led to Tripp sleeping. Just about this same time the wind shifted and started blowing from the southwest. I double checked the gps, which was back on my board and started to slowly angle to the south. I knew we had worked our way slightly north of the rhumb line and now the wind was going to try to push us even further that way if we didn't correct for it.

When the boat was behind me, moving directly toward me I could only hear the wash of the bow wave. About 2 o'clock I started jonesing for my last powerbar and the last half o' banana that I had stashed on the boat. The last two gel packs that were taped to the board no longer had any appeal. Just the thought of them made me want to brush my teeth to get rid of their sticky sweetness. I began paddling with my foot up and could hear the wash behind me. 40 minutes later they still hadn't caught up to me so I sat up, and was greeted by a totally empty horizon. The sounds I had been hearing had been from the small whitecaps that were now breaking. So now it was a true solo paddle.

The last time I had talked to Bob I had told him that I thought I would be finishing between 4 and 4:30pm. Much later than I'd hoped due to our slow outbound journey. At that point he had used his cell phone to call Mike Eaton and a couple of other friends to let them know. And now alone I paddled on. And my shoulder hurt. And I had my foot up. And I started worrying about them. They had been carrying an extra twenty gallons of gas in portable containers in the stern of the boat. I searched the horizon for smoke. for anything. I paddled back about a quarter of a mile, on my knees, craning my neck. Nothing. And then two Navy helo's buzzed me and I looked again. OK boys, you're on your own. I had the gps and it said I had 11.8 miles to go.

By now the wind had shifted back to the northwest and I was catching little runners. Better than I had all day. This was fun. I knew I was going to make it. I could spend a little more energy to gain a little more speed. And I was watching the speedo on the gps go up. As high as 7.9 knots(9 miles and hour)and the

mileage counter go down. 7.6 miles to go. 3.4 miles to go. I could just make out the top of the Sea World tower through the haze. Everything else was still shrouded by a thick gauzy afternoon haze. Four o'clock. I was jazzed. Under thirteen hours. Very cool. Jeez it still looks a long ways away. As the numbers rolled down on the gps, for some reason I was recalling an article I had read about Army sharpshooters and how they could hit a six inch target at a 1000yds. My brain starts whirring. 1000yds, that's about 5/8 of a mile. When the gps read .625. Wait a minute something is wrong here. .625 and I can barely make out buildings. Nobody can shoot anything that far. I start punching buttons and uh oh....

Years ago, I don't know how many, there used to be a buoy five miles straight out from the Mission Bay entrance, and it is still on old charts. A couple of months ago I decided it would make a great training course for this paddle. So I punched in the coordinates and went looking for it. Several times. Never found it. And never erased the waypoint from the gps. If you use a gps, NAME YOUR WAYPOINTS. I had only numbered mine, and after I had gotten the gps back on my board the last time and punched in the waypoint I punched the wrong one. I did however cross over the mysto five mile buoy spot at 4:01pm. Now I had five miles to go!

I was shattered. What an dummy. Now my arms really hurt. I wasn't going to finish until 5:20 or so. People waiting on the beach, and instead of having an hour to relax before heading off to work, now I'm gonna be late! And the slow realization.....no more daylight savings time.....the sun sets at 5:05. And I never turned off my light. Those little AA batteries can't last 14 hours. Time to race the sun. And I keep expecting the boys to come roaring up behind me at any moment. I hope they are OK. And I sure could use that powerbar.

Having to watch that countdown of miles again was an agony that turned into ecstasy as I got closer to the end. I had to force myself to down the last of the powergels. And to drink more of the bug juice. The pier finally came into view, and the lights went on. a couple of fishing boats crossed in front of me. My arms didn't hurt anymore(again.) My knees didn't hurt anymore from kneeling. I felt great. Very tired but elated. I hope someone's left on the beach to catch my board if I fall off in the surf. I had fallen off while paddling probably half a dozen times. More frequently the more tired I got. I passed the pier at 5:17 and the surf didn't look very big. I

waited for one wave to roll under me and road the back of the next one to knee deep water. Surprisingly I could stand. 5:20pm and time for a burrito. Why? Such a totally irrelevant expression of love? Duke Kahanamoku, Tom Blake, Eugene Smith, Bob Hogan, Tommy Zahn, Larry Capune, Susan Chaplin, Mike Eaton, Mouse Robb. I'll never be one of them but I've often wondered what it might feel like. And if you've ever stood on the beach surrounded by friends and gotten an

"...Attaboy!..." from Mike Eaton you'll know why.

[Eaton Surfboards and Paddleboards, San Diego, California](#)



Becky Jackman congratulated Kevin Eslinger yesterday after he paddled 61 nautical miles from San Clemente Island to Ocean Beach, finishing in 14 hours. *K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune*

**Voyage on paddle board
'was quite an adventure'**

was quite an adventure

[SD Union article](#)

