The Inuit have a saying -- *Ayuuknakmat*: “It can’t be helped”. Right now though, we had to at least try. “Come on!! Paddle! Paddle!” Rearing through the tumbling water, dark rocks tore past our bobbing cart. Bleary eyes wide, Clark Carter and I barked futile advice at each other as the edge of one carbon fibre wheel rim splinters against another submerged boulder. “Have we got a puncture!?”. I shouted, prising my eyes from the situation unfolding ahead, flashing a glance at the four enormous 1.5m diameter wheels that were keeping us afloat as we were swept broadside down the rapids. We’d been alone in the arctic for 43 days and were still 350km from achieving our goal to walk 700 km across Victoria Island in Arctic Canada. Surely it isn’t about to end here.

The cart lurched violently. If a wheel failed, we’d sink into the ice-filled water, along with our 16 dry bags of supplies. We dug furiously at the water, helpless against the flow of the ‘Kuujjua River’ (‘Big River’ in Inuit). Finally, after bucking over standing waves and troughs, we were spat out the end and left spinning gently in a back eddy. For several moments, we sat there, shaking, listening to the mournful cries of a pair of rough legged hawks wheeling overhead. At least it wasn’t the cold making us shake: it was now mid-summer, the 1:00 AM sun shone down brightly and the temperature was a balmy +7 deg Celsius.

The start of our expedition six weeks earlier had not been so temperate. Spindrift scurried across the frozen lake as we stood at our 2005 expedition end-point (AG 82). Piled around us collecting snow lay our dismantled Paddleable Amphibious Carts,
PACs, along with everything we needed to survive in the Arctic for 100 days, including 25 kg of chocolate and our new and improved polar bear tripwire camp perimeter alarm. Fully loaded, each PAC weighed 250 kilos.

After recovering the Australian Geographic Society flag we’d buried in 2005, we loaded up, and turned on our GPS tracking system, which was linked to our website. “This is it!” I shouted, “Let’s go!” We shouldered our harnesses and leant forward. A wave of relief washed over us as our PACs started rolling - finally, we were on our way. Clark raised an approving eyebrow: “Not too hard, hey!”. Two hundred metres later, as we tried to climb the snow bank out of the basin, excitement was replaced by reality. It was brutal. “In theory,” I gasped into my video camera, sweat dripping from my exhausted face, “the PACs... can only get lighter and we can only get fitter ... but... right now, I’m struggling not to just... fall to my knees and vomit.”

After just six days of hauling, something made me stop in my tracks. “Clark...” I croaked, “There are tears in our Kevlar wheel covers.” This couldn’t be happening. Not so early. Folds in the inner layer of Kevlar had created wear lines on the outside, and sliding my finger into several gaping tears, the sickening realisation sank in. We’d be lucky to have covers for another week. Unprotected, our balloon tires wouldn’t last long. “I guess we just keep on hauling, until...” Clark trailed off. “We’ll see how far we can get, anyway.” Cold, hungry and eating painkillers for blistering feet and painfully strained Achilles tendons, the following days were as much a mental struggle as they were physical. Step by step we pushed ourselves forward, bandaging the shredding covers with tourniquets of webbing.

The increasing summer warmth was a double-edged sword as the melting snow turned our world into one giant slushy. Each snowshoed step broke through the ice, sloshing water that froze our pants into a solid mass. In desperation Clark suggested linking the carts together and hauling in tandem, like a dog team. It made a big difference, and our moods lifted.

To our genuine surprise, on Day 19 we stumbled into Hadley Bay – the first
milestone. To try to prolong the life of our wheels, we decided to head for the Kuujjua River, 75 km to the west, and attempt to raft down a 200km section flowing in vaguely the right direction. Unfortunately, now some snow had melted, we came face to face with two old foes: Victoria Island’s thick, sticky mud that sometimes forced us to unload and carry gear across one bag at a time, and good ol’ “Death Terrain” - expanses of ice-shattered, razor-sharp limestone that slashed at the fraying Kevlar as we climbed the plateau of the western, hilly half of the island.

The lopsided rolling motion caused by our grotesquely bulging tires started to fatigue our PACs, and rolling down a slope on Day 30, one of the axles buckled. The repair took a full day in the rain as we cut off the bent part, shortened the other axle, chopped the PAC down the centre and re-riveted it back together so that it fit the new axles – all with one brittle two inch fragment of hacksaw blade and a Leatherman multitool. Well, Ayuuknakmat. Making do with limited resources is half the fun of an unsupported expedition.

Five days later, we somehow reached the river. Amusingly, as we triumphantly rolled the last metres into the safe zone -- the water -- we got our first puncture. Patching it with a bike repair kit, we had to laugh - Victoria Island wasn’t giving up her km easily.

The first day of drifting lazily downriver, sun sparkling, relaxing to suitably grand classical music while enjoying the scenery moving past at 4km/h, was Clark’s 24th birthday. We slid past arctic wolves tearing into a musk ox carcass on the banks, and even managed to catch several enormous lake trout. We air-dried them the traditional Inuit way, and they lasted us for more than a week. Buoyed, we decided to convert to non-stop river travel, living in our drysuits for days on end, which also helped protect us from the billowing clouds of mosquitoes. We ate, cooked and rested on our floating platform. It couldn’t last, and as the number of rapids increased, our amount of sleep decreased. By the time we reached our exit point on Day 45, we had slept only 3 hours in as many days. We collapsed into the tent for a quick one hour nap, and woke 18 hours later.

Each day, while Clark cooked dinner, I wrote updates for our website on our tiny
Eee PC laptop and uploaded them on our satellite phone. Over 13,000 people followed our progress, and we drew inspiration from thousands of emails from around the world. We even had whole school groups following online.

The final leg of our journey was the biggest unknown - 200km of tangled contour lines on our topographic map. Adopting blind faith and an excess of TLC for our Frankenstein wheels -- now decorated with 18 tourniquets and large patches of unprotected rubber -- we nurtured the PACs towards the far side of the island. Determined to stop us, Victoria Island threw up every conceivable obstacle, from hail, twister clouds and bucketing rain, through to intimidating musk ox bulls and fields of metre-deep moss, mazes of canyon-like valleys and jumbled boulder fields. By the time we crossed the 100km-to-go mark on Day 62, our struggles had turned into a crusade – we would get there, even if we had to make a dash with backpacks.

Seventy days and 700km after starting - 128 days and 1,000km if you include the 2005 component - we limped into the waves of the Arctic Ocean at the westerly tip of Victoria Island and gave each other a hug. That moment was four years in the making, during which the journey had become our lives. The things we've learnt and experienced between the two coastlines have set our personality, taught us what to value, how to endure and enjoy, and has formed one hell of a friendship.

While trying to organise a pickup (the person we had organised had gone to jail), our bodies began to shut down. We had pushed beyond our limits, and the instant we took the pressure off, our joints swelled and an overwhelming lethargy consumed us. Worryingly, we had set up camp on a polar bear highway – and had a sticky moment when one, walking directly towards us, towered 4 m tall on his hind legs to get a good whiff before heading off. When the tug boat the Jock McNiven steamed past five nights later and the captain dispatched an inflatable dingy and ferried us and our gear out to her, we were ready to go home. Stepping inside, the wind ceased, warmth seeped into us, and the smell of coffee hung in the air. “Welcome aboard!” Said the skipper, “There’s hot showers down
below, and our cook will look after you.” She certainly did. “We’re going to get fat!” I laughed. “Oh well,” grinned Clark, “Ayuuknakmat - Pass us another chocolate brownie.”