Drawing deep for a long, tough journey

Description

Original painting, oil on canvas, Graeme Altmann. (Altmann Studios, Highett, Melbourne.)

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

On days like this, we need hope.

On days like today, when we see laws passed that allow even greater damage to our wild coast than what we have already inflicted, it would be so easy to just give up, because the battle is exhausting.

But on days like today, when I need to draw deep on hope, I think of my late uncle Alf Altmann.

In March 1970, almost 50 years ago, Alf attempted to become the first person to row solo across Bass Strait, from Tasmania to Victoria, in a home-built kayak.

He built that kayak piece-by-piece in his garage under his home on Riverview Tce, here in Warrnambool.

To train for this epic journey of more than 200km, he would row out to Deen Maar, (Lady Julia Percy Island) and, once or twice, he carried native saplings in his boat to plant on the barren island.

The saplings never survived. Neither did my uncle. His attempt to cross Bass Strait ended just 1.5 miles from the Victorian coast. So near. So close.

And when I think of his story, I think of an anecdote that stays with me each day as I do my bit to try

and turn around decisions that hurt our local environment more than protect it.

“Why do you bother taking those saplings with you?” someone asked Alf. “Nobody will see them out there.”

“I see them,” Alf replied. “I know they are there, and that is all that matters.”

This painting is how my artist brother, Graeme Altmann, often captures the essence of Alf’s journey: a boat, suspended above the turbulent sea, with the proud thylacine pointing toward an unknown future.

We can’t change the mistakes of the past. Alf never came home. The thylacine is gone. But I keep trying to do what I can, whatever I can, to turn other mistakes around.

Because we know. And we see. And that is what matters.

Category

1. Opinion

Tags

1. Alf Altmann
2. Bass Strait
3. campaign
4. environment
5. Graeme Altmann
6. hooded plover
7. kayak
8. Levy's Beach
9. racehorses on beaches
10. Tasmania
11. thylacine

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