

Where would we be if nobody took a risk?

Revisiting the place where Alf Altmann started his epic effort to row solo across Bass Strait.

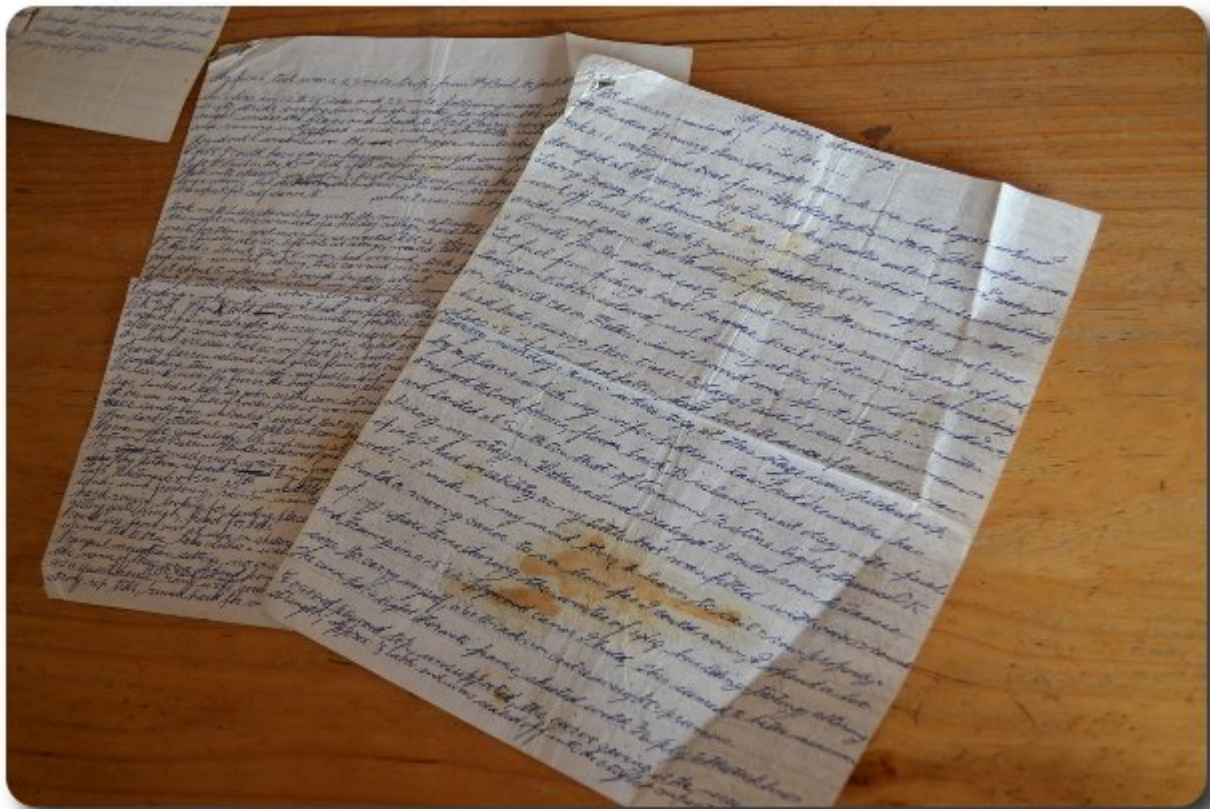
Drawing deep for a long, tough journey

A stretch of our wild beach is about to be sacrificed, but this story reminds me of why we must not give up hope.

My greatest challenge: Alf Altmann's diary

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Last week we [brought you the full story](#) of Alf Altmann's ill-fated attempt to row solo from Tasmania to Victoria in 1970. Alf, of Warrnambool, kept notes during his journey and at least a portion of these were found in a waterproof section of his kayak after it was retrieved off the Gippsland Lakes. His son, Alan, transcribed them in 2004. This is the first time they have been published.



"My Greatest Challenge"

– So Far –

The idea of rowing Bass Strait came to me last year when I took a 10' outboard powered boat from Apollo Bay to Smithton.

The compass was damaged at Naracoopa, King Island to a greater extent than I realised. Leaving Grassy for 3 Hummocks Is. I ran into rain & about 3 miles visibility went off course to Black Pyramid, put the night in on the anchor, not game to sleep, fortunately the wind did not rise & I made Hunter island early next morning, running out of fuel.

Got fuel from fishing boat & became lost a second time in bad visibility, landing on Robbins island, not knowing at the time which island I was on, (I) saw old car on Walker island and

rowed over, spent 2 days in mutton bird huts, during this time – 3 days – I didn't see the sun, moon or stars & 6" of rain had fallen, had lost all sense of direction.

Saw Stanley (Tasmania) next day and knew where to go, at this stage was picked up by a plane which my wife & brother in law Fred Trewartha had arranged to look for me, flown back to (Robbins) island next day with fuel and landed at Smithton that afternoon, $\frac{1}{2}$ stone light otherwise OK.

During my stay on Walker island I realised I could row to Tassie if only I had visibility, as my little boat was fitted with oars & rowed well.

I made up my mind there to learn to sail & row properly, build a rowing canoe to see how far I could row.

I spent a lot of my spare time during the winter of 1969 building – testing – altering and training in a 15' by 2' plywood canoe I built. This seemed to be the minimum size to carry myself, a 60 lb cast iron centre weight & provisions.

The canoe has a light 'Meranti' frame, sheeted with 3/16 ply to the deck line & 1/8 curved plywood top, unsupported, the curve giving it the necessary strength. Approx. 1/3 each end was sealed off into airtight compartments to assure floatation with airtight hatches to hold food, clothes & equipment and finally filled with plastic bottles.

I also packed foam floatation in the centre compartment where I rowed, this was fitted with a well, to house the centre-weight, which I bolted in. If the centre-weight was lost in this narrow craft, one would hardly survive at sea. After all this is a survival craft, not a showpiece.



Waiting for high tide, by [Graeme Altmann](#). Graeme, who is Alf's nephew, has drawn upon Alf's story for a series of works depicting men at sea.

I learnt to sail it, it ran well with the wind and I could do a fair reach with a small sail & jib. To cut down equipment I rigged an extension to an oar for a mast, one could be under sail in about 10 minutes, but this was only to run back if I struck strong head winds.

The idea was to be the first to row Bass Strait.

During tests I found out I could not capsize the craft and it would ride out strong winds & big seas, however it was possible to have it blown over with too much sail, with an unexpected gust.

I found out one could get out and soon get in the lee side, the craft righting itself, however I almost made as much speed with the wind with the oars running with the wind without much effort, without the risk of capsizing.

The rudder fitted keeps the craft on a much more even course, particularly running with fresh winds and big swells. Also set for beam winds to avoid rowing on one oar to keep on course which is tiring.

I purchased a pair of broken teak oars from our rowing club for \$1 which when repaired were long enough for my craft. Light & strong!

I carry 2 sea anchors – essential for offshore boating, \$1 each at disposals. A sand pick and 200' rope, 2 smoke, 2 flame & 1 parachute flares, torch, alarm clock, floating fish knife, compass, tent, 2 sails, canvas cover which allows me to sleep in boat, tommy axe, multi grips & screwdriver, camera, 1 aluminium saucepan, 1 spoon. Yellow windcheater & trousers which I row in, in rough or cold weather, sleeping bag, plywood, copper tacks & 'Pabco' for repairs, one can tack 3/8" copper tacks through 1/8" ply for temporary repairs straight onto existing plywood & clinch them over making fast waterproof repairs.

Only enough clothes to be acceptable when landing & to keep warm. About 2 lb's of bran biscuits, I have been eating these for 37 years, I must have eaten tons of them by now, a terrific health food, dried fruit, honey, powdered milk, nuts, 'Granose' biscuits & water. These are my main foods.



Equipment salvaged from Alf's kayak after it was retrieved from the ocean off Snake Island, Gippsland.

I also carry flour, rice and cheese in case one is stuck on an island, fishing lines to catch fish, can usually get mutton birds this time of year. I carry a survival bag in case I have to leave the boat, this would be the last resort, I would only leave it if I looked like getting washed onto rocks.

In the bag, a complete wet suit, which keeps one afloat and warm. I feel I would always make it to land in one of these, also about 2 days supply of food and water with a knife, and a 30" beach ball which can be blown up to attract attention.

My final test was a 27 mile trip from Warrnambool to Julia Percy island in 7 hours in 12' to 15' seas and 25 mile following seas. The canoe took it in it's stride surfing down high swells, landed on the island, slept the night under the stars and back to Port Fairy the next day in 90° heat and running into head winds & swell, about 14 miles return. I

found out a weakness in the outrigger rowlocks, otherwise all OK. I felt I could have gone as far again, however got some chafe on legs from rolling seat.

Left Warrnambool on the 23rd of February, after studying our weather for years feel from late Feb. into March – we get our best conditions while the days are still reasonably long & warm.

Put the canoe on the 'Empress' & got a cabin, arrived at Burnie and got train transport for self and canoe to (illegible), where I was met by Jim Petrio of Gladstone who took me to Little Mussel Bay with the canoe on a trailer, unloaded near beach & slept waiting the night on the verandah of a holiday cottage.

Hard bed, little sleep, TV asked me to wait for them next morning, so waited till 12, and was about to go when I heard a shout, the TV man had arrived, took film for 10 to 15 minutes, got away, good seas, no wind, strong tide carried me a mile or two to west before I got out of it about 5 miles out.



The home-made kayak that was tested off the

waters of Warrnambool and Port Fairy before the Bass Strait crossing.

Rowed briskly, about (illegible) miles to go, late start, about $\frac{1}{2}$ way to Barren Island, my first stop, saw some big fishing boat which swung my way, he swung in a wide arc following and finally blew his whistle for me to slow down.

When alongside the 'Skipper' asked me where I was heading & when he saw I had completely stripped he said only 2 words 'Oh God'.

When I told him I was making for Cape Barren island he appeared concerned & asked if I was alright, the crew were eagerly hanging over the side having a good look. After some directions we parted, rowed all day in the raw, only sand shoes on which are essential as my feet are built in to give power on the rolling seat.

Nearing Barren island 2 seagulls flew over, one turned back & had a second look, I concluding this was a lady seagull and it was time I put clothes back on. The less one wears the freer the body moves, also my swimming trunks were chaffing my legs.

Landed at Cape Sir John as the sun set, only about 3 miles from the settlement, but as the sea was full of rocks felt it was unsafe to go any later, pulled canoe up in nice sandy bay, unloaded and erected tent as fast as possible in sheltered scrub. Now dark, ate some nuts, apples & bran biscuits & honey, drink of water & off to bed. Warm night, good sleep.

Up and away at 7 a.m., lumpy & easterly winds funnelling between Cape Barren & Flinders, otherwise good run, some wind assistance, landed at Whitemark 1 p.m., small crowd waiting on wharf, a good welcome, stayed at Interstate Hotel. Left Whitemark 8-15 a.m. on 25th, unsettled weather, headwinds, can always turn back or land, wind freshening, rain on mountains, wind change to west, now beam on, hard rowing, looking for

landing places, strong rip at (illegible), decide to press on.



The Sweep, another of Graeme Altmann's works that reflect the relationship between the ocean and man.

Getting quite rough, head for Cape (illegible), finally land at Pine scrubs near a road I could see from out at sea on sheltered beach, easy to land, no breakers, pull canoe up and tie to tree, take clothes & walk up road, over hill. See large home in beautiful tranquil mountain setting, no one home, so sunbake.

Mr. & Mrs Syd Millyard of Leeka, the name of this area, arrived home about 6 p.m., had been shopping, they ran home as a guesthouse. ABC rang for news, rang wife, good nights rest, left for Kelliecrankie at 8-15, thru a strong rip tide, rowed hard for some 20 minutes and got thru, was baling out, looked up and found out I was being swept back at about 4 knots almost back into tidal rip, around Cape Frankland, almost hit sunken rock, it suddenly uncovered about 8' away.

Good run along coast with some wind assistance to Killiecrankie, children waiting on beach, a very pretty sheltered little bay. Met Alf Stackhouse & wife, also local people, very friendly. Alf had full knowledge of all the islands & landing place right thru to the mainland. Also had his private plane, stayed the night with them. ABC reporters rang up.

Decided to miss Craggy island after seeing it and discussing it with Alf. Stayed the night with them, no sleep, thinking of 38 mile (illegible), hadn't been this far before, arranged with Alf to fly over about 4p.m.

Set alarm for 3 a.m., in water at 3-20 a.m., can see Deal (Island) light flashing & head for it. Conditions good, slight side winds off Craggy island at 7 a.m., pleased with progress.

Winds freshening, thinking what have I done to deserve this, pray for good conditions.

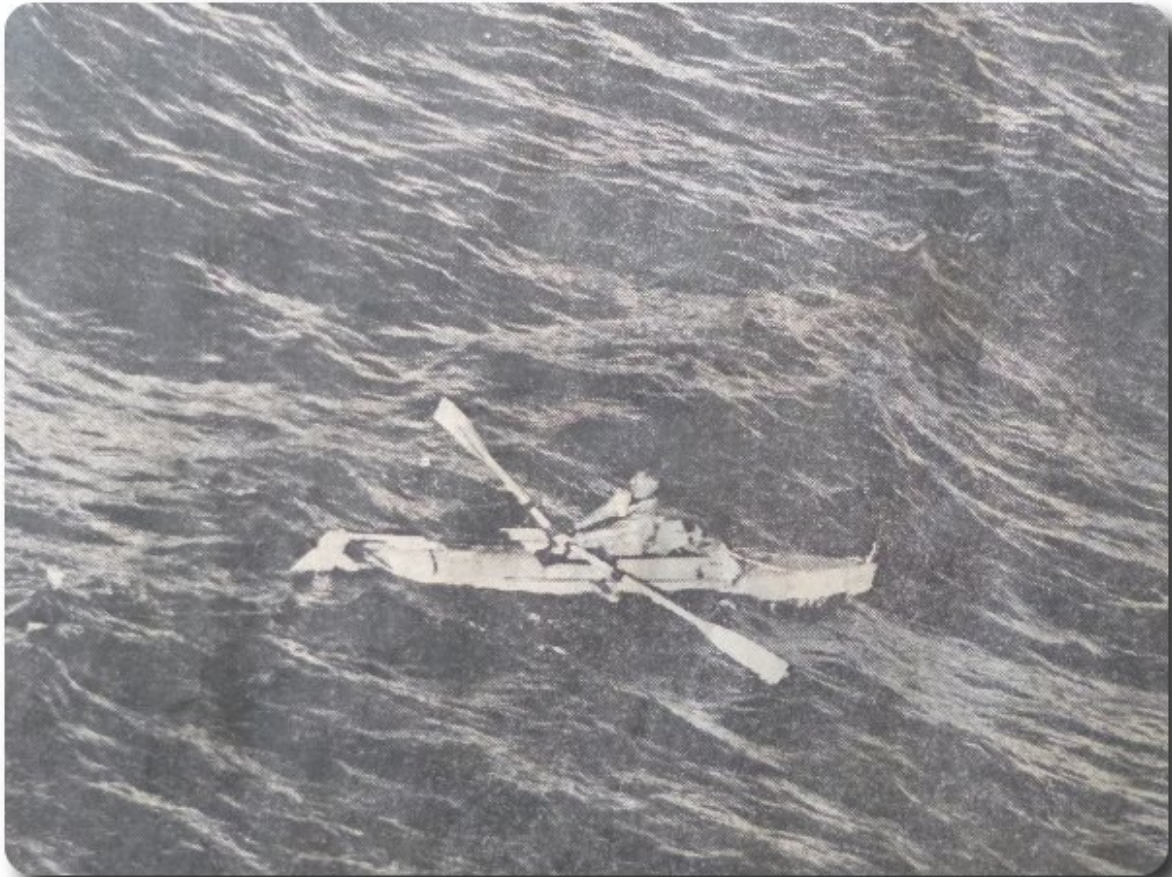
Sighted Deal Island at 8 a.m., quite high in haze, winds dropping off (illegible) rock at 10 -15 a.m., strong tide pull... [notes end]

Postscript: The notes finish about half way through Alf's journey which came to a fatal end on March 6, 1970, just 2km from the Gippsland Lakes. Before his death, Alf was already plotting his next adventure: to row from mainland Australia to Papua New Guinea.

Reviving Alf Altmann's epic

adventure

Alf Altmann's attempt to cross Bass Strait solo in a home-made kayak in 1970 is the stuff of legend. Bluestone has pieced together the full story about this Warrnambool man's brave quest ...



The last shot taken of Alf alive, photographed by The Herald and published on March 4, 1970, as he powers from Hogan to Cliffy islands – just 58km from the end of his 300km journey.

By Carol Altmann

The recent Bass Strait crossing [by three men on paddleboards](#) has revived memories of an epic feat by Warrnambool's **Alf Altmann**, who became the first man to row solo across the same treacherous passage – at the cost of his life.

Precisely 44 years earlier, on the morning of February 25, 1970, Alf set out to do the same perilous journey.

He pushed off in his home-made, 4.5m kayak from Little Mussel Bay, north-east Tasmania, and headed out for what he thought could be up to a two-week journey to Port Albert, Gippsland, depending on the weather.

It was a trip for which Alf, a builder by trade, had meticulously prepared both mentally and physically, and followed many years of experience on the water.



The kayak Alf made for his journey was plywood over a timber frame and declared by Alf to be unsinkable.

Indeed Alf, who was my uncle, had sailed for 18 years and had crossed Bass Strait *eight* times before in various motor-powered craft, many of which he built himself.

It was during one of these crossings that his engine failed

and he was forced to row his boat to the safety of an island, after which he was so exhausted that he vowed to learn to row properly and promptly joined the Warrnambool Rowing Club upon his return.

Unlike the paddleboarders, who were all aged in their 30s, Alf Altmann was 56 years old – and a grandfather – when he decided to take on rowing across Bass Strait entirely on his own. There would be no support crew or anyone to rush to his aid if he struck trouble.

He also had none of the high-tech, water-resistant, fail-proof navigation and flotation equipment that is now commonplace in marine sports.



Boat maker: Prior to rowing his kayak across Bass Strait, Alf had crossed the strait eight times in various powered boats, including this home-made vessel.

Instead, Alf made his own bright-orange kayak from a timber

frame and plywood shell, with a 30cm long, 27-kg steel keel and various sealed compartments so that if one area sprung a leak, it would not sink the boat.

His on-board equipment included a small sail and portable mast, a tent, flares, waterproof matches, a sea anchor, a radio transmitter, a compass and a life jacket that, by today's standards, was more likely to leave you floating face down than face up.

No wonder everyone, including his wife, Isobel, thought he was mad to attempt to cross a stretch of water notorious for its high seas and battering winds.

Alf, however, was used to such scepticism and loved to live on the edge.

When he left from Melbourne in a powerboat to circumnavigate Tasmania in 1968 – a total distance of 1930km – the local fishermen thought he was crazy, but he simply responded: “what challenge is there in retracing common routes?”

Bass Strait is the ultimate challenge, even for those in maxi yachts, let alone a plywood, home-built kayak, but Alf was convinced that his kayak was unsinkable.

“This is a survival boat, not a luxury one,” he told reporters in the days before his departure.



Everyone was gripped by Alf's voyage, especially people from Warrnambool: here YMCA radio club leader Bill Wines tunes into an update, surrounded by eager listeners.

Alf arrived in Burnie, Tasmania, on board a trading ship and made his way with his kayak to the north-east of the state via train and then friendly locals who were prepared to give him a lift to Little Mussel Bay. Isobel, who was home with three of their four sons (the youngest, Philip, was 16), would meet him at the finish.

Once on the high seas, Alf – like the paddleboarders have done since – planned to island hop his way across the strait, from Cape Barren to Flinders, up the coast of Flinders and across to Deal, to Hogan, to Cliffy and then the 45km run home to Port Albert.

And while some of these islands were inhabited, if only by a lighthouse keeper, Alf intended to mostly camp and live off his supply of nuts, dried fruits, honey, powdered milk and

special bran biscuits that Isobel always made for him.

It takes a special courage to push off into the ocean knowing that you will be utterly alone at sea, but the first days of Alf's journey could not have gone more smoothly.

Setting off in beautiful weather, Alf ploughed through the water: far from taking up to two weeks, he was soon on track to make the crossing in a week.

Australians were riveted by the unfolding story as Alf checked in with lighthouse keepers at each island: first one, then another, then another...



Although born in the bush, Alf adored the ocean and always set himself new sea-faring challenges, like circumnavigating Tasmania in this powerboat in 1968.

It was only when Alf reached Cliffy Island, the last island before home, that the weather began to turn sour. Despite being so tantalisingly close to the finish – so close that Isobel was already waiting on the wharf at Port Albert – Alf was forced to bunk down at the lighthouse for two nights.

The acting lighthouse keeper, Sjoerd Boontra, would later say that Alf, despite having just rowed more than 200km, helped with odd jobs around the lighthouse while itching to get back on to the ocean.

Come the morning of March 6, Alf was determined to start out early for the last 45km of his journey, even though the weather forecast suggested rough conditions for a kayak and Sjoerd urged him to wait.

“His reason for leaving was that he wanted to surprise his wife...who was not expecting him until 3pm,” Sjoerd later recalled.

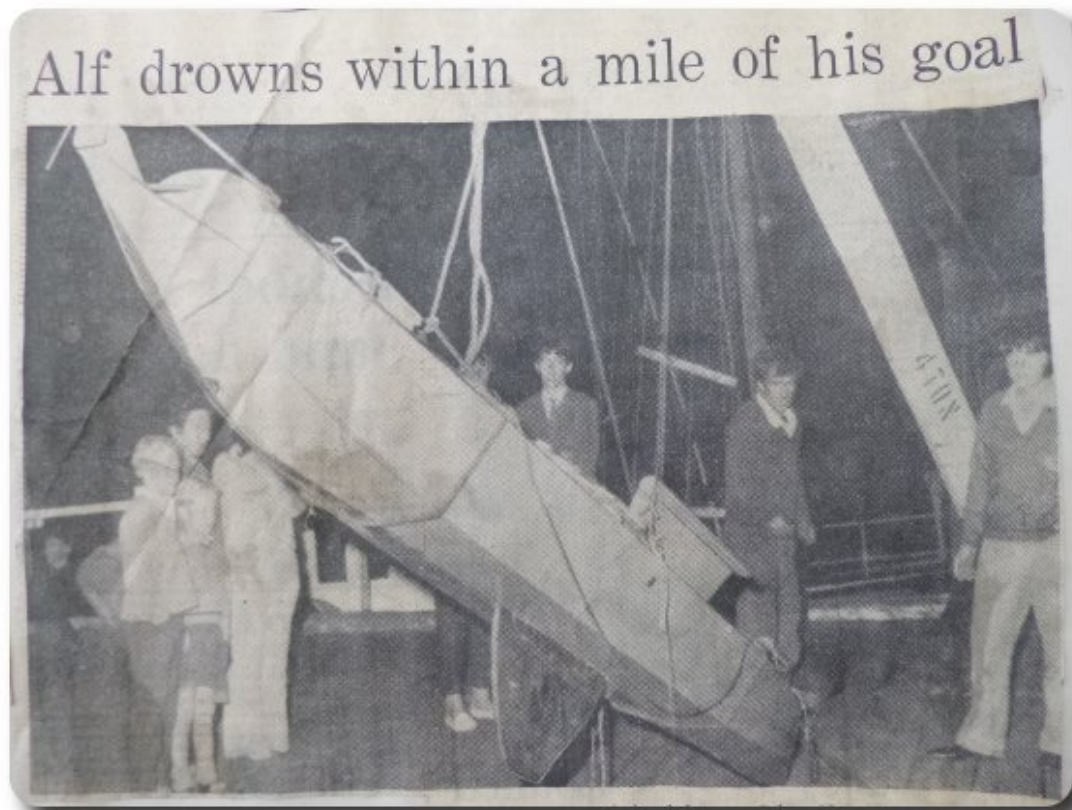
“It will have to be pretty bad for something to go wrong now,” Alf said.

These were among his final words. A minor storm blew in an hour after he left Cliffy Island, whipping up 25 knot winds and 4m waves.

Alf failed to arrive at Port Albert by his expected time of 11.30am, and the crew of the *Marjorie Phyllis*, a lighthouse supply boat that was assigned to meet him offshore, began to worry.

By 1pm, the local police launched a full-scale air and land search, with Isobel still holding out hope that he had taken refuge on a scrap of an island.

But at 5.58pm, the *Marjorie Phyllis* received a crackled radio call from the search plane: “It’s all off”.



The adventure comes to a tragic end: Alf's kayak was retrieved just 2km from land.

Alf's body, wearing the top half of a two-piece wetsuit and a spray jacket, was spotted less than 2km from Snake Island, part of the Gippsland lakes. His kayak was found nearby, intact, but for the splintered oars: it really was unsinkable.

How Alf came to drown is still not known, but abrasions across his face suggest he capsized and was knocked unconscious by hitting his head, perhaps on one of the oars. From there, it was over. A life packed with determination, daring and adventure had come to an end.

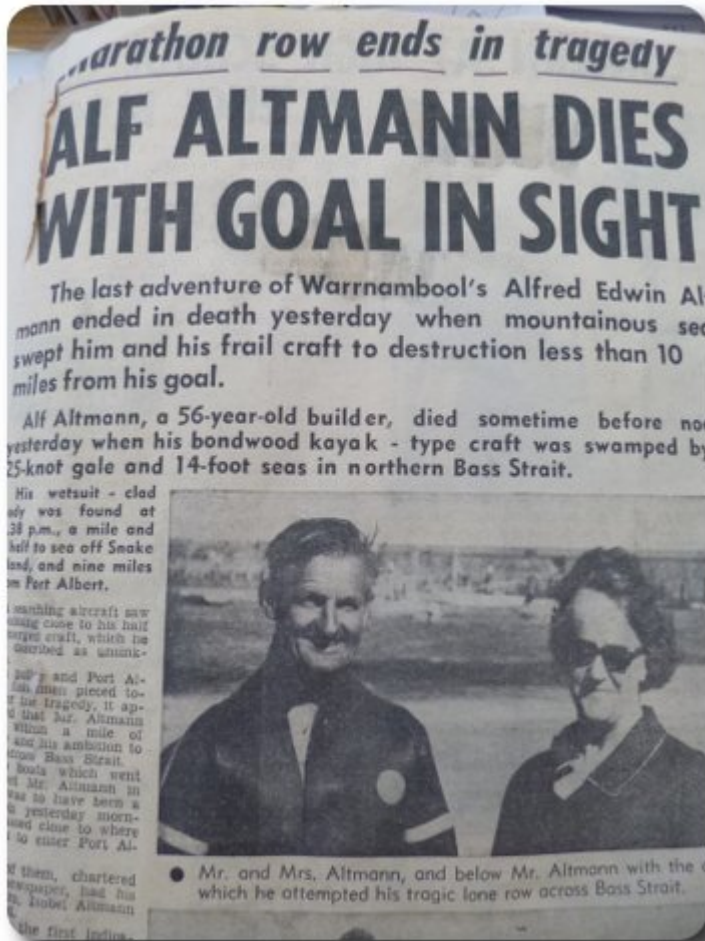
More than 500 people crowded into the Warrnambool Presbyterian Church for Alf's funeral, where he was described as a man of great courage and a "pilgrim adventurer".

And Isobel, even within her own grief and that of her sons, Keith, Ken, Philip and Alan, reminded us that Alf would have wanted to die knowing he had pushed the boundaries.

"Where would we be if nobody had taken a risk?" he once told her.

* * *

[Part II: Where is Alf Altmann's kayak today?](#)
[Read Alf's diary notes retrieved from the kayak](#)



* *Bluestone Magazine* would like to thank Alan and Philip Altmann for their assistance in researching this story. Other details have come from original media reports and documents housed in the Public Record Office Victoria. Alf's widow, Isobel, passed away in 2003.

Where is Alf Altmann's kayak now?



Alf Altmann's kayak shortly after it was retrieved from the sea on March 6, 1970, following his fateful attempt to cross Bass Strait. The kayak was in pristine condition, proving Alf's theory that it was unsinkable.

By Carol Altmann

In revisiting [Alf Altmann's fateful effort to cross Bass Strait solo](#) in his home-made kayak, one question inevitably arose: where is the boat now?

After Alf's death, it is understood that the kayak was stored first at the Warrnambool Ski Club and later at Alf's brother's property in Warrnambool before Alf's widow, Isobel, offered it to the new **Flagstaff Hill Maritime Village** (it opened in

1974).

Unfortunately, however, the kayak at that time was not considered historic enough for inclusion in the museum: after all, it had only been a few years since the Bass Strait crossing attempt.

Instead, the kayak apparently ended up on display at the now defunct **Lancaster's** marine, on Raglan Parade, before being donated to the **Warrnambool City Council** in the early 1980s, where it was stored at the council depot.

And that was pretty much the last anybody heard or saw of it...until now.



Alf Altmann during a test run with his home-made kayak, prior to setting off from Tasmania on February 25, 1970.

After being contacted by *Bluestone*, the WCC's communications manager, **Nick Higgins**, established that the kayak was no longer at the depot and may have been donated to the **Warrnambool Triton Woodworkers** club, housed in the old Fletcher Jones factory.

Bluestone called Triton club secretary **Louis Seater**, who used the opportunity of a club afternoon tea to spread the word and see if any members knew the whereabouts of the kayak. Despite his enthusiastic efforts, nobody did.

Just as the trail was about to run cold, Nick Higgins popped up again – not only with news, but a grainy photo of what looked like the kayak in storage at Flagstaff Hill.

And it was.



Showing the ravages of time: Alf Altmann's kayak as it is today.

Flagstaff Hill manager **Peter Abbott** kindly organised for the kayak to be taken out of storage for us to confirm its

heritage and to photograph it. Peter believes the kayak has been with the museum for at least the past 22 years, mainly for safekeeping, but that not a lot was known about its history.

Alf's second youngest son, Alan, joined us to see the kayak for the first time in at least 30 years and even though there are no immediate plans to put it on display (due to space), he was thrilled to know that at least something of his father's kayak remained.

The boat is in poor condition, probably due to being moved so much in those early days, with some pieces missing and others falling apart, but it remains a very visual and emotional reminder of Alf's extraordinary journey.

Perhaps the 50th anniversary of Alf's voyage – in 2020 – would be the perfect time to again reveal the “unsinkable” kayak and its story to the public.

For now, however, it is wonderful to know that what remains of the kayak is in safe hands.



Alan Altmann with his father's kayak that he had not seen for more than 30 years before it was traced to a store room in Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum.