Basic Detail Report

Solo Trans-Tasman Kayak

Vessel number

HV000320

Date

2006

Primary Maker

Paul Hewitson

Description

Mirage Sea Kayaks' owner and builder Paul Hewitson worked with McAuley to design and build the craft. It was based on hull and deck sections used in the construction of various models of the Mirage range, all developed from the first and hugely successful Mirage single sea kayak that has dominated the market from the mid 1990s. This is a Greenland style of sea kayak, which had been the preferred hull shape for the early development of production sea kayaks in the 1970s. These boats feature a hollow bow and stern waterline plan, moderate veed hull with a firm bilge section, a graceful overhanging bow, and shorter overhanging stern with a skeg effect at the heel. Hewitson added a clever feature to his version of this popular style by building the rudder into the stern shape, whereas other craft had a separate rudder that could be folded back and stowed on the deck. Andrew McAuley's kayak hull is made from the bow and stern of a Mirage double kayak, while the deck is built up from other stock moulds and modified to be higher than normal to give more room in the cockpit. The hull and deck are a solid fibreglass laminate that is considerably thicker than normally used on a production model, and it proved strong enough to survive the extremely severe conditions encountered on the passage. It was 6.4 m long by 0.62 m wide (21 ft x 2.03 ft); by comparison a typical production single sea kayak is around 5.2 to 5.8 m long, and 0.55 to 0.60 m wide. Andrew McAuley was a widely experienced and well respected Australian adventurer, well known through the pages of the Australian Geographic Magazine. Perhaps the key element to the kayak's design that allowed McAuley to pursue this extraordinary project was the cockpit cover, dubbed 'Casper'. Three years earlier McAuley had done a trial passage across the Gulf of Carpentaria in a standard sea kayak, and he slept in the open cockpit in warm conditions. He had modified the hull of that boat by moving the forward bulkhead to allow enough room for him to lie down with his legs outstretched. He intended to do the same for the trans-Tasman voyage, but clearly needed a cover to be protected from the much colder and stormy elements. This would also serve as a cabin to shelter in during storm conditions when it was not possible to paddle. The solution was a fibreglass pod covering (with an air vent) that was secured from the inside around the rim of the cockpit, and then pivoted on arms either side so that it would swing aft to sit on the aft deck when not in use. It was high enough that he could sit up in the cockpit while it was in place. The pod also gave the kayak a self-righting ability if it was capsized when the pod was secured over the cockpit. However when it was aft on the deck, it did the opposite in a capsize and held it upside down, because the pod would fill and then trap water as soon as the craft inverted. The kayak capsized on a

small number of occasions during the trip, and the only way it could be righted was for McAuley to exit the craft and drag it upright himself, an exhausting and dangerous task. However before the final capsize off the New Zealand coastline a pivot arm was damaged and apparently detached from the pod. This meant that after the kayak had capsized, the water-filled pod was hanging much lower in the water and he was then unable to bring the kayak upright. The bright orange craft carried many support items such as a sail, manual desalinator, bilge pump, camera arm, stability floats, compass, radio, a tracking beacon, satellite phones, EPIRB and sufficient stores for 40 days at sea. Much of this was stowed in the cockpit or the aft compartment which he could reach through a watertight hatch. However other stores were in the forward compartment, and he had to exit the kayak and swim up beside the forward hatch to open it and retrieve additional supplies, another dangerous and awkward maneuver. McAuley was inspired by the long distance sea kayak voyages made by Paul Caffyn in the 1980s using standard sea kayaks, and was especially keen to do things on a limited budget. Caffyn had twice attempted a Trans-Tasman crossing but abandoned both voyages. McAuley worked toward this voyage by first testing himself with much shorter voyages. They were nonstop, unassisted crossings of Bass Straight and then the Gulf of Carpentaria, using standard production model sea kayaks. McAuley was not alone in attempting the Tasman Crossing, and was well aware of the Crossing the Ditch expeditions plans underway at the same time. Their initial friendly rivalry had become quite intense and McAuley was determined to be first to New Zealand. After a short period of sea trials McAuley left Tasmania early in December 2006, but on the first night he felt he was developing hypothermia, so he returned to land realising the craft was poorly insulated. After modifying the cockpit and his sleeping arrangements to get better insulation from the cold water he left again on the 11th January 2007 and settled into a pattern of steady progress toward Milford Sound on the South Island. Early on his tracking beacon failed, but despite requests from marine safety authorities to abandon the voyage or be dropped a new one he continued onwards determined not to have any assistance. He updated his position with daily contact by satellite phone text messages to his weather and route advisor Jonathon Boglais in Melbourne. The craft capsized on at least documented two occasions, and surviving video footage shows that after these early experiences he greatly feared it happening again. About 2/3rds of the way through the trip he encountered a severe Force 10 storm, a regular occurrence in the Tasman Sea. He had to ride this out for around 24 hours before he could resume paddling, and it was a terrifying ordeal. It is understood the pod and pivot arm were damaged during the storm. As he approached the New Zealand coastline conditions were relatively moderate and on his last afternoon at sea it is likely he was in sight of the high mountains around the fiords that mark the region's coastline. However, this was also one of the most dangerous parts of the voyage, because the reflected waves off the coastline made the sea pattern much more confused and unpredictable than the long swells encountered further out to sea. Many people had warned him of the dangers this imposed and the possibility of a capsize in this area. The kayak is presumed to have capsized early in the evening of the 19th February 2007 and it appears that the craft was carrying a soft tank of seawater on the high foredeck ready for desalination, further reducing the now lightly loaded kayak's stability at a critical time. McAuley had to exit the craft and it is assumed he tried to right the kayak but the damaged pod would have made this impossible. He called for assistance with his VHF radio, asking "I need rescue". During the call McAuley is thought to have lost his hold on the kayak and was swept away. He was never recovered. The authorities had difficulty deciphering the short message and considered the possibility that it was a hoax call. Little was done before nightfall, and early

the next morning a full scale search was initiated. The drifting, capsized kayak was found 24 hours later, with the front compartment flooded and the pod missing. A coronial enquiry held in New Zealand a year later recorded the facts as they were known and addressed what might have occurred at the time of the capsize The report did not place the responsibility on anyone for the tragedy. It was critical of some aspects of McAuley's preparation, and very critical of how the initial onshore response by New Zealand authorities to McAuley's garbled call for help was handled. In 2008 Andrew McAuley's kayak was donated to the Australian National Maritime Museum and is now part of the National Maritime Collection.

Dimensions

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