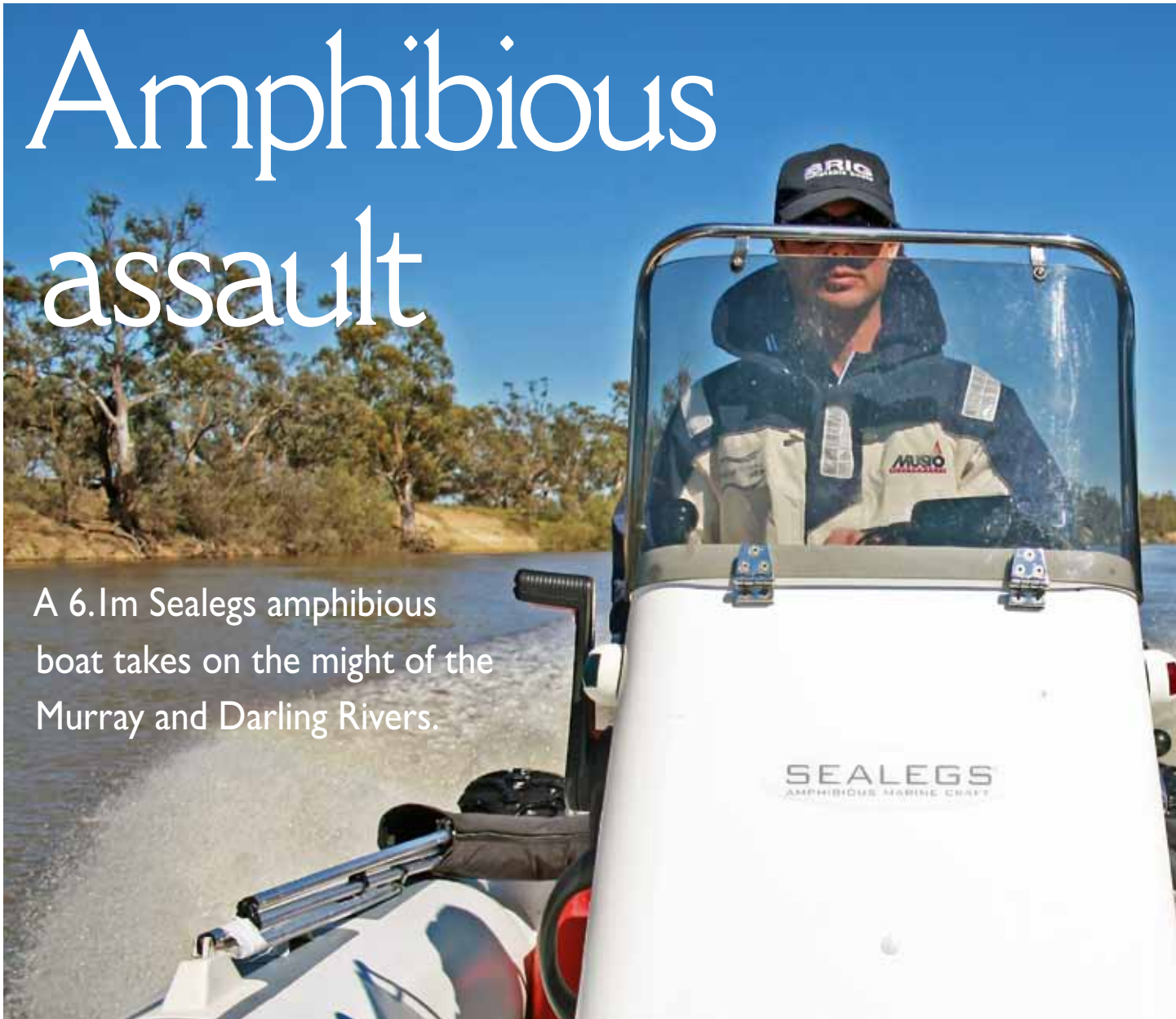




Amphibious assault

A 6.1m Sealegs amphibious boat takes on the might of the Murray and Darling Rivers.



Since the Dreamtime, people have gone up and down the Murray River in all manner of ways. In 1830 Charles Sturt and seven blokes rowed down Australia's biggest river, starting on the Murrumbidgee at Gundagai (NSW) – which was then the western limits of the known world (for Sydneysiders of the day, anyway). It was Sturt's honour to name the Murray after Sir George Murray, Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Poor old Charles and the boys reached the Murray's mouth at Lake Alexandrina in South

Australia and found no sign of the ship they expected to meet, so they had no choice but to turn around and row back up again. They were very, very hungry and probably more than a little irate.

At the other extreme is the way I meandered up the Murray a couple of years ago, on a four-star paddle-wheeler – where the biggest hardship was finding the will to resist eating everything available at the breakfast buffet.

David Seargeant and Liam O'Halloran, of Sydney-based Sirocco Marine, opted for a level

By Barry Tranter



of adventure somewhere between the two. In October 2010, they set out to run up the Murray and Darling, south to north, camping at night by the riverside or in accommodation, if it could be found.

UP THE RIVER

The pair boarded a 6.1m Sealegs RIB in Lake Alexandrina in South Australia, their backup vehicle close at hand. Then, propelled by a 115hp Evinrude, they shot up the flooded Murray to the



Not many boats can drive out and park and camp for the night.

intersection with the Darling River, where they turned left and sped on until they ran out of water.

From there, they headed back down the Darling to the intersection with the Murray, turned left again then ran on to Fishermans Bend – where the Sealegs was loaded onto its trailer and the boys headed for home. The trip took seven days, a good length of time for an adventure – Sturt and his men rowed upstream for almost six weeks before they threw in the towel and sent two men overland to find help.

Although David and Liam's original plan was thwarted by the low water in the Darling, they set one milestone – they were (probably) the first to pilot an amphibious boat from the Murray's mouth to Fishermans Bend.

For the first time in more than a decade, the Murray was able to co-operate. "The river was in



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flood”, says David. “I was there 15 months before when it was a series of sandbanks and channels.”

On my previous paddle-wheeler trip, undertaken in March of 2009, we ran out of water south of Lock 1 at Blanchetown; below that point the river was still navigable by the big ship, but many of the private jetties on the river bank were 2m clear of the surface.

David and Liam started the trip with Sirocco partner, Neil Webster and Neil's 13-year-old son, Benjamin. After three days, Neil and Benjamin headed for home and Struen Smith, one of David's kayaking mates, joined the crew. The team rotated duties – two in the boat, the third driving the backup car and topping up provisions along the way.

On a typical day the crew would breakfast by the river, then set a point to meet for lunch. If the day's run ended outside a town, they would camp by the river. Day one ended at 6:00pm at Swan Hill, Vic. The trip log reads, “Dinner and stay at the pub with the local wildlife (footie club).”

On day two they camped by the river. For day three the log reads, “4:20pm, arrive Lock 7. Drive out and park and camp for the night.” Not many boats can drive out and park and camp for the night...



“Before we left we gave a lot of thought to what would be the most economical speed. On the river we found that cruising at 40km/h saved only a minimal amount over cruising at 50km/h – so we cruised at 50.”



The Sealegs hit a few logs without damage, but the crew had to change props on day seven when the boat hit a log while reversing from the shore. The dinged prop was their only equipment problem over the course of the trip.

“But we didn’t count on the cold,” said David. “On the bank a jumper was okay but, at 80km/h on the river the wind chill really affected us.”

The Sealegs’ progress up the Murray did not go unnoticed. “The bongo drums were out when we went through each lock and the lock-keeper would radio ahead to the next lock to let them know the ‘weird boat’ was coming,” said David.

The crew had hoped to be able to lower the Sealegs’ wheels and drive around the locks. “We drove around a couple,” said David, “but in most cases there weren’t ramps on both sides. Or if there was, there wasn’t any connecting road.” So the Sealegs locked through in the time-honoured fashion, the process taking only five or 10 minutes.

THE END OF THE LINE

The trip went according to plan until the low water in the Darling put an end to play. “I met Liam and Struen about 60km up the Darling,” said David. “When I had to abseil down the riverbank to reach the boat, I knew we wouldn’t be able to get much further.”

Later that day (day five) the Sealegs finally came to a halt. The log reads, “74km up the Darling, river blocked by a tree. We get around.” But at 3:30pm the team admits defeat and sets up camp by the river.

Meanwhile, David – in the backup car – can’t find the boat. The two-way radios only have a range of around 10km and there’s no mobile phone signal. David resorts to driving into each



the lock-keeper would radio ahead to the next lock that the ‘weird boat’ was coming.



property in turn. This was a great way to meet colourful and helpful locals, but the novelty quickly began to wear thin. Finally, the two parties found enough of a mobile phone signal to exchange text messages, and David found the crew.


The next day they loaded the boat onto the trailer, drove back to the mouth of the Darling then headed east on the Murray for two days.

Sturt and the boys began their upstream row on February 12. On April 11, the starving expedition abandoned the boat and he sent two men to find the relief party, which he assumed was nearby. He had better luck than Burke and Wills; Sturt's men returned a week later and the expedition returned to Sydney on May 25.

The Sealegs crew ended its expedition on a different note. On day six they camped in bush at Fishermans Bend, some 1038km up the Murray. Day seven took them to Lock 15 at Euston. The log's last entry reads, "11:30am, join the Sturt Highway. Sydney is 930km away."

I asked O'Halloran a standard question – to nominate the trip's high points and low points.

"High points? Seeing the Murray in all its glory with plenty of water in it, and learning more about the river, water usage and how it affects the people whose livelihoods depend on it."

And low points? "No low points." Upon his return to Sydney, I suspect Sturt's comments might have been slightly different... 

NOT YOUR AVERAGE BOAT...

Sirocco Marine is the distributor for Sealegs, a Kiwi-built Rigid Inflatable Boat (RIB) that has three retractable legs to enable it to operate on land.

On the 6.1m Sealegs shown here, an 18kW four-stroke Honda powers the hydraulic system that raises and lowers the legs and powers the rear wheels; the 7.1m Sealegs has a 25kW Honda driving all three wheels.

The leg struts fold up out of the water when the boat is in the water. When approaching the beach or the launching ramp you lower the legs, fire up the Honda, cut and tilt the outboard, then drive out of the water under inboard power.

