

Yukon Arctic Ultra Feb 2017

430 miles by MTB

Pre-race

On 30th January 2017 I found myself yet again at Heathrow wrestling 2 large suitcases and an enormous cardboard bike box to the check-in desk for Whitehorse via Vancouver.



Sunrise over Whitehorse before the race

Meeting with friends old and new in the days before the start I considered my chances of finishing this year. I was massively undertrained – no rides more than 4 hours long and not many of those. I hadn't ridden more than a couple of hundred miles on this bike, and I was having problems loading it since I couldn't get a rack to fit the carbon frame. The bike fully loaded weighed about 20kg, but I would also have to carry a rucksack weighing around 12kg. I

knew the course and the checkpoints – but that also meant I knew just how tough this race can be. And in the previous 2 years age had started to catch up with me physically.

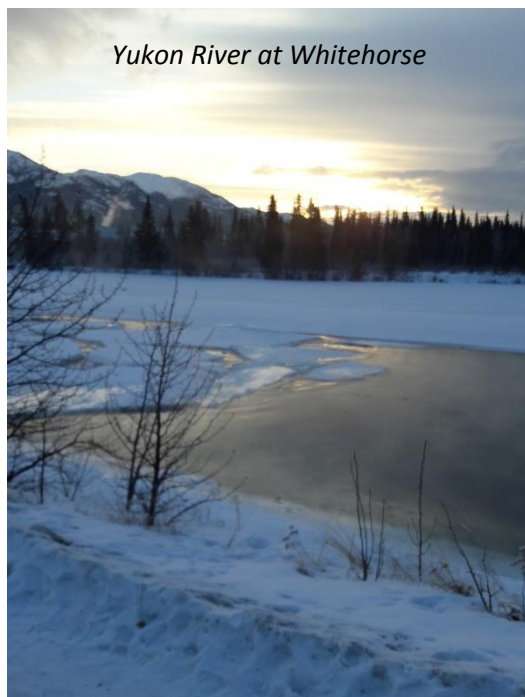
At 60 what was I doing here?

I knew God wanted me at the start but He hadn't said anything about the finish. But I also knew I had massive prayer support. This year's plan was just to make the most of however much of the race I could complete and to enjoy the journey.

It was a great privilege to be Race Chaplain for the YAU, to talk with many athletes and volunteers and to get to know the Very Reverend Dr Sean Murphy and the congregation at Christ Church Cathedral in Whitehorse.

Leg 1 – Whitehorse to Rivendell (26 miles)

At the pre-race briefing we were told of changes to the first leg to Rivendell because of poor ice on the Yukon River. After only a mile or so we would be going up off the river and along hilly trails through the woods before dropping back on to the river at Takhini Bridge. Not the easy flat start I had been expecting. So on advice from expert cold-weather racer Andy Heading I decided to start at the back so as not to be pressured into trying too hard when I had to push the bike up the steep hills. My old mantra was ringing in my ears "slow and steady finishes the race".



Yukon River at Whitehorse

I missed the official photos at the start with a last comfort stop (well it would be the last one in the warm for 100 miles!) but collected my bike and rode off right at the back with Andy Gregory (430, bike).

It was slow behind all the pulks but once we started the steep climb off the river I was glad I had hung back. I settled in, remembering all I had learned in previous years about monitoring core temperature, extremities and effort, and keeping my mouth and nose constantly covered. Ride the downhills and flats, walk the steeper and/or longer hills to conserve energy.

The descent back onto the river at Takhini Bridge was steep and scary so I chose caution and walked down it. Once back on the river it was relatively easy riding to the checkpoint (and marathon finish) at Rivendell. Just a hut with a fire outside – no going indoors here. But a

cheerful welcome from the Lucy and the volunteers, plus the hot chocolate and food, made up for the lack of other comforts. Andy Gregory was still there, having had to change the gear cable on his bike. We set off together along the river towards Dog Grave Lake before night fell.

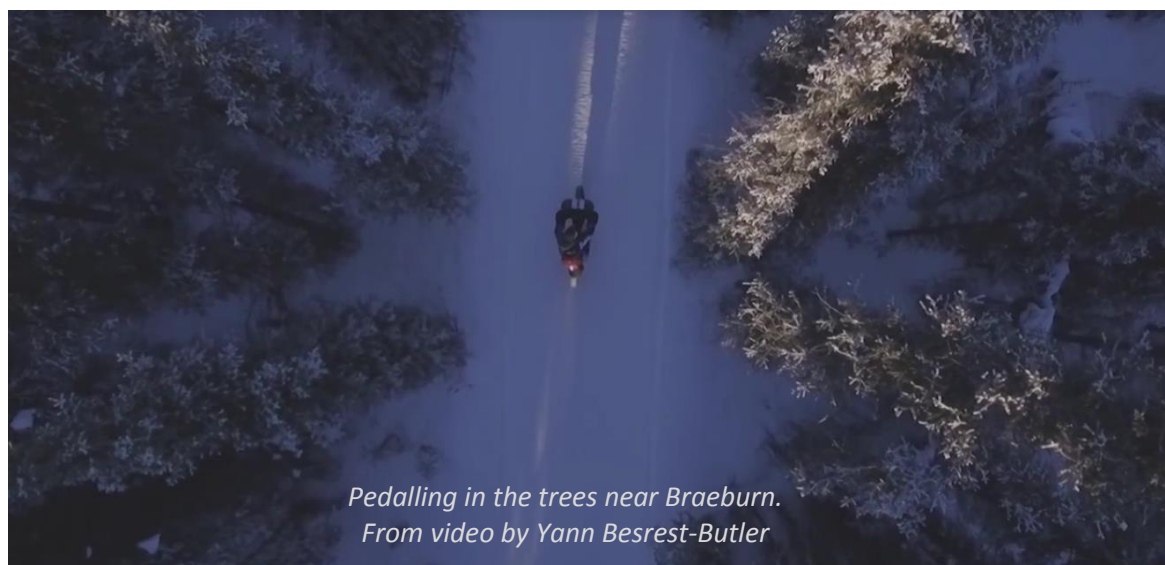
Leg 2 – Rivendell to Dog Grave Lake (33 miles)

After 8 or 9 miles we left the river heading for Dog Grave Lake. The flat section was over and the climbs started. These were gradual at first but then steeper. Andy, a much more competent cyclist, rode off ahead and I started the familiar walk/ride routine through the night. Asthma kicked in on the hills – I was working too hard and sweating too much. The temperature dropped to -35ish and unusually it was a damp cold. My new Alpkit top layer was not working well so I reversed top and mid layers which was an improvement. Eventually at some point during the night I pushed the bike up the last steep hill to the Dog Grave Lake checkpoint. Again just a fire and hot food, hot water and chocolate. A quick change of base layer because of the sweating, and on with the down jacket. Andy Gregory was already there, and Gavin Clark (430, bike) in his tent was coughing badly – he was not sounding well. Other athletes started to arrive, some not in a good state. I decided to push on and keep moving, pedalling and walking through the night.

Leg 3 – Dog Grave Lake to Braeburn (35 miles)

Dawn came as I continued for Braeburn. Much of the trail was familiar and I welcomed the reassurance of the known. I was passed by Andy Gregory looking strong but in much pain. He would

end his race in Braeburn. My hands felt colder than they should in spite of the new pogies with fleece liners which was puzzling.



*Pedalling in the trees near Braeburn.
From video by Yann Besrest-Butler*

But in the endless trees before Braeburn lake I had some fun with photographer Yann who was trying out a new drone – at least I didn't fall off on camera. I even managed to get up the steep slope just before the checkpoint without too much difficulty. I arrived at Braeburn to a lovely welcome from chief medic Diane and volunteer Lucy. Large quantities of food, dry clothes, and a cabin to sleep in – heaven! After a few hours sleep, a massive breakfast and the application of some essential blister plasters to areas best left to the imagination I left heading north for Ken Lake.

Leg 4 – Braeburn to Ken Lake (44 miles)

It was very cold but the trail was firm and the lakes long and flat so progress was relatively fast. But my hands were still colder than I liked in spite of stuffing the pogies with an old base layer to keep the chills out. Some of the land sections between the lakes had steep slopes but I only had to unload the bike for one climb this time so either the bike and trail were better or I was getting stronger! The trail to Ken Lake goes on forever and then Ken Lake itself goes on forever. This section was a reminder of the sheer size of this beautiful country. I kept thinking I'd missed the checkpoint but eventually it appeared on a cliff overlooking the lake.

With help from owner Bernard I managed to get the bike up to the checkpoint. There was a warm tent to eat in and to dry clothes. Enrico (430, foot) was already there. The food was good and included bread and butter and oranges – luxury! I heard the story of the Serbian athlete whose attempt at the course record had been stopped at Ken Lake by severe frostbite to his nose and fingers. Apparently he was not best pleased to be prevented from continuing but could not be allowed to risk further damage to himself.



Ken Lake checkpoint

I set up my bivvy by the fire outside next to Enrico and fell asleep instantly. When I woke Enrico had gone and other athletes had arrived. It was time for me to pack up and go. After several helpings of porridge and hot chocolate I left down the steep slope with Bernard's help.

Leg 5 - Ken Lake to Carmacks (35 miles)

The next 15 miles were similar to the previous 40 – lakes interspersed with steep climbs through the woodland linking them. It was still cold over the lakes and a cheeky breeze meant feet were at risk so I had to push the bike stomping my feet from time to time. Then the trail went into the woods along the Yukon river, twisting and turning up and down through the trees and onto the river itself.



A Quest dog team rest area overlooking the Yukon River

But my hands in gloves and the pogies were far too cold. I put on extra Buffalo mittens with handwarmers inside them but it didn't seem to help much. I didn't stop to eat because I didn't risk my hands getting even colder. I had to take remedial 'windmill' action many times. I couldn't ride because I couldn't use the brakes or change gear with so many pairs of gloves on. At least on the

final very steep climb before Carmacks I managed to get the bike up the slope even if it was like a series of bench presses. Eventually I came off the river and found the checkpoint at a recreation centre in Carmacks. At least now I could take the bike inside and see what was happening to the pogies.

Diane and the volunteers were brilliant. Hot food, lots of tea, a shower (amazing to be clean!) and somewhere to sleep and dry my kit. I removed the pogies and they were soaked. Cold air was pouring in through gaps where the pogies attached to the handlebars. I sealed it as best I could with duct tape and pieces of an old base layer and left the pogies to dry thoroughly.

Then more bad news – my fuel bottle in the drop bag had leaked in spite of being in a sealed bag. The clothes I didn't really need but all my food apart from dehydrated meals was contaminated. I

thanked God that this had happened here, and set off for the Carmacks supermarket for new supplies. The next leg would be done on Malteezers, chocolate covered fruit and Ritz crackers!



After more sleep I set off for McCabe. At the main road about 3 miles out I noticed a rattle on the bike and the rear brake stopped working. I walked back to Carmacks. The locking nut for the rear brake was loose. Robert offered any help he could give. I phoned a friend Mark Redwood at the bike shop at home in the UK for advice. Glenn the snowmobile driver helped remove the wheel, tighten the nut and replace it. I didn't have the correct tool to tighten it but Glenn did the best he could – thanks Glenn and Mark!

So I set out again but now the gears were out of alignment. Returned and adjusted them. Finally I left 6 hours later than planned but I was grateful to be leaving at all because my race could have been over.

Leg 6 – Carmacks to McCabe (38 miles)

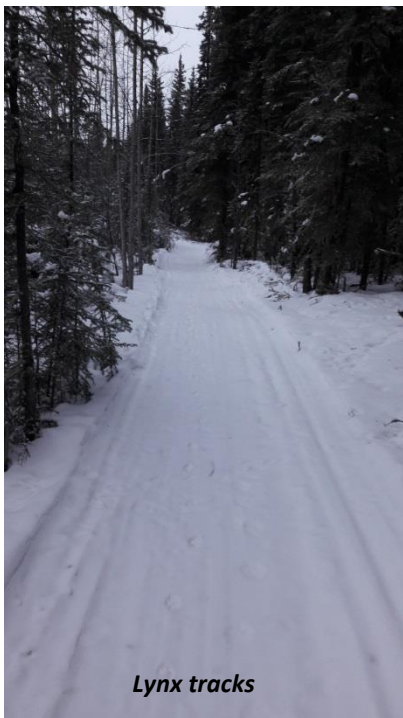
This is one of my favourite legs. The first 15 or so miles were out in the open on the fire roads with sweeping ascents and descents. Some long climbs but it was nice to see the sky after so much time among the trees. Eventually the trail turned off to the right through the forest for many miles leading down to the historic Yukon Crossing point on the river. The day had been overcast and as I turned off the fire road the snow started falling. It was gentle but persistent. Night fell and it became hard to see where I was going with the snow in the head torch. The pogies were much better but I was still having to manage my hands carefully. The trail went down onto the Yukon River 3 times - with the jumble ice I chose to walk not ride – the idea of falling and cracking my head open on the ice was not appealing.



The tree-lined trail seemed endless and unchanging but some welcome messages in the snow left by volunteer Julie announced just 5km to the checkpoint. I crossed the river for the last time and reached the workshop serving as a checkpoint. A wonderful welcome from brilliant volunteers, food, hot tea and somewhere to dry my clothes. And a floor to sleep on indoors. Perfect.

Leg 7 – McCabe to Pelly Crossing (28 miles)

When I woke it was before dawn and still snowing. Other athletes had arrived while I was asleep but no-one had left yet so I would be leaving tracks for them to follow – let's hope I got it right!



This was another of my favourite legs – possibly because it is also the shortest! The first few miles are generally rideable as the trail parallels the main highway. Then some climbs through an area of forest fire with spiky brushwood and eventually a string of lakes interspersed with woods and more brushwood. It continued to snow and the trail was becoming harder to find, particularly across the lakes. Any wrong moves would end in a pile-up in a snowdrift and extricating myself and the bike was not always easy. Plus a persistent breeze was creating more windchill.

There were lots of animal tracks on the trail including lynx and wolf. I peered into the trees but saw nothing. I was grateful when snowmobile driver Ross appeared and made more of a trail for me to follow – and the chat was welcome too. I reached the start of the downhill into Pelly Crossing road, which meant a lot of braking, some walking and many prayers as I skidded down the

slopes more or less under control. A couple of dogs chased me into Pelly Crossing where Yann the photographer was waiting for me.

Pelly Crossing was another indoor checkpoint with food, water, drying facilities and a very noisy gym to try to sleep in. My leg grippers on my cycle shorts were starting to irritate so I cut them off. And it was time to apply a few more blister plasters to those critical areas.

After several hours of not sleeping I decided to move on to Pelly Farm overnight.

Leg 8 – Pelly Crossing to Pelly Farm (33 miles)

The poor ice on the Pelly River meant that this leg was to be on the farm road not the river. Not good news. The 'road' is very hilly and has a variable surface at the best of times. With the fresh snow this would be a challenging ride.

At night the road was eerie with overhanging trees laden with snow. It was still snowing gently but there was also a hazy full moon. I felt faintly uncomfortable, as if I was being watched. The road seemed to go on forever and I saw no-one. I was grateful for the sweet coffee in my flask helping me to stay awake.



The view from the front door of Pelly Farm – and a snow covered bike

At last the road flattened, and fences appeared as I entered the farm. The farmhouse was lit up with markers like fairy lights. I fell off the bike and into welcoming arms of owner Sue and the volunteers. I was taken into the house, my wet and icy clothes stripped off and whisked away for drying, and I was presented with the wonderful Pelly Farm lasagne and loads of tea. Clean clothes from my drop bag and a warm bed to sleep in – bliss.

Later I was joined by Steve Hayes (300, foot) the race leader in the 300 mile race. He was in very good spirits with only 33 miles to go until his finish. And he confirmed that a wolf had been following me along the farm road.

During the mandatory 8 hour layover at Pelly Farm I had a good sleep, ate a hearty pancake breakfast, sorted my drop bag and then ran out of reasons not to leave. It was snowing more heavily now but owner Dale said the snow was moving south so it should get easier as I went north. Then he added "but this is the Yukon - anything could happen".

Leg 9 - Pelly Farm to Scroggie Creek (65 miles)

This was the leg I had been dreading. The longest and mentally the hardest leg. Three big climbs and a long distance along the creek where I feel enclosed and trapped. I left Pelly Farm around 4pm starting up the first climb. The trail was very soft and I did lots of pushing. There were some areas of overflow.



Heavy snow on the trail at night

The snow was getting heavier. In the tightly packed woods I saw lots of animal tracks - I could identify wolf, lynx, hare and fox. Around midnight the wind started to increase and the snow got heavier still. I was losing the trail under the snow and the headwind meant I could see little. I was no longer able to ride and the windchill was increasing. I prayed that the God who had stilled the storm would stop the snow but that was obviously not His plan. I started looking for a place to bivvy and wait it out but where? Very recent animal tracks showed 2 wolves moving together - a bit more of a pack than I liked so I battled on till the tracks disappeared into the woods.

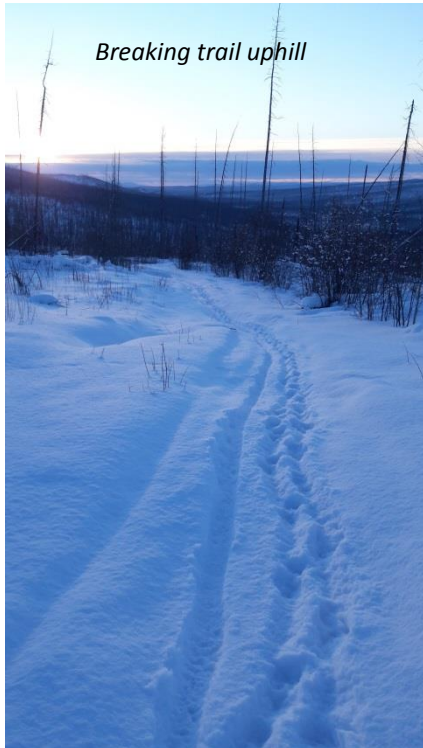
I found a fallen tree that together with the bike might offer some shelter. This was real and serious. If I needed help none could arrive for at least 12 hours so I had to get it right first time or I would be in danger.

I stepped carefully off the trail and propped the bike up against the tree. I used the

avalanche shovel to dig a bed in the snow with a lower section for the cold to sink into. Then broke some branches off nearby fir trees for extra insulation, inflated the thermarest by mouth (no time for messing with the bag) and got bivvy bag, sleeping bag and liner together. All the time trying to keep my hands as warm as possible. Then into the bag, avalanche shovel nearby, close up the openings and sleep – there was nothing else I could do. I woke a couple of hours later - and the snow was worse. I had a brief one-sided argument with God then went back to sleep. When I woke again the snow and wind had eased.

The trail had completely gone. Sometimes I could just make out what might be an edge but mostly I was just following the gap in the trees. Riding was not an option. Dawn came. The trees started to thin out and the trail got steeper as I started up the second climb. This was ridiculous. I was breaking trail pushing the bike up a steep climb. A few tiny steps through the snow, then a rest to catch my

breath. I remembered a Bible verse about strength rising when you wait on the Lord. Wait then push, wait then push. It seemed to work. And then the welcome sound of a snowmobile. It was Glenn coming through from Pelly Farm to put a trail in. After 20 miles I had a trail to follow and sometimes I could even ride!



Towards the end of the day I went up the last climb, Christmas card perfect in the fresh snow. Glenn passed for the last time on his way back to Pelly Farm and I was alone again. I dropped down to the start of Scroggie Creek and settled in for a long night of pushing/riding.

As dawn broke the trail emerged from the creek into a wonderland of snowy trees, small lakes and a soft but perfectly manicured trail. No footprints just the snowmobile tracks. But it went on forever. Every turn I expected to see the checkpoint but every turn revealed more trail. Had I missed a turning? Was I going round and round in circles? Childhood fears of being trapped and unable to escape started to overwhelm me. I prayed and looked at it logically. The markers were still on the right. I was not going over my own tracks. The checkpoint had to appear soon.

Then I saw a sign face down on the snow - Scroggie checkpoint. A couple of minutes and I was there. I fell in through the door somewhat shell shocked and Jessica and Mike immediately made me welcome. Excellent food and lots of tea later I felt much better. I asked medic Sue to check my right knee which was painful and to my surprise found I had tree trunks instead of legs. Massive fluid retention between groin and ankle - what was going on?

After some discussions I rested at Scroggie with my legs elevated to try to get the swelling to go



down. Not sure it helped much but I slept and enjoyed the company. And 19 hours later Sue checked me again and said I was ok to go as long as I signed the waiver to say I knew I might make it worse by continuing. With only 100 miles to go stopping wasn't an option. So I left Scroggie before dawn for Indian River.

Leg 10 – Scroggie Creek to Indian River (50 miles)

Having struggled up the climb to Eureka dome in the dark 2 years ago I really wanted to see this beast in daylight. I rode along the Stewart River and then up through the abandoned mining areas as the sun came up. There were large areas of overflow but I got through ok with a lot of prayer. The day was warming up and the trail was soft. Several athletes on foot passed me - conditions were not ideal for the bike.



On one of the hills before the main climb I heard a rattle from the bike. The locking nut on the rear brake had come loose again. I had to unload the bike and use my thermarest as a repair bench. It was too heavy to fix without turning upside-down, and I struggled to tighten the nut and then to get the wheel back in place. Thank God the temperature had risen so I could actually touch the metal with bare hands – albeit briefly. It was fixed and rideable again, but I could only use the rear brake in emergencies now.

I started up the main climb. It was steep and unrelenting but much friendlier in the sunshine. I climbed the last kilometre as dusk fell and the trail became softer and harder going. It felt like it would never end. But when I reached the top the wind was blowing snow into drifts around the dome and across the ridge. It was unrideable, and getting out of there before it got worse was my top priority. Eventually I descended enough to have some shelter, and then further still to the old mining roads. These were much more fun to ride except for the lack of a rear brake, and in spite of a few challenging moments I reached the checkpoint just beyond Indian River. It was the middle of the night and I woke volunteer Stewart and medic Adam. They welcomed me into the tent, prepared hot food and chocolate and helped me to dry my damp clothes. Adam checked my legs and we decided they hadn't got much worse so after bivvying outside for a few hours (I overslept!) I set off on the last leg to Dawson.

Leg 11 – Indian River to Dawson (49 miles)

The trail to Dawson included the infamous King Solomon's Dome. I really wanted to climb in daylight so I could see what it looked like. The early trail was better and more rideable although I was very worried about some areas of overflow that had opened up with the milder weather. My worries were unfounded however and I crossed without too much difficulty – the reassurances of the snowmobile drivers helped a lot.



Climbing the dome

The trail continued, with ups and downs as usual, walking and riding. A couple of cheeky tough climbs to get the legs working and then the ascent of King Solomon's Dome itself. It was late afternoon by this time and the views were amazing – nothing like I had imagined in the dark on previous years. In the silence God started talking and I kept stopping to listen to Him and to soak in the grandeur around me. The trail levelled out all too soon, and I started on the long route around the top of the dome. The weather changed and the wind rose blowing snow across the trail and adding a significant wind chill factor. After what felt like years I came off the dome and onto the ridge leading to the mining roads towards Dawson. The ridge was very hard work – darkness, no protection, soft trail, drifting snow and a strong head wind. I struggled to keep pushing the bike in the right direction.

But in endurance racing nothing lasts forever and eventually I started to descend. The long descent down the mining road was fun but a little hairy with just a front brake. I had to keep stopping to maintain control. Then my head-torch started to fade. I replaced the batteries – and those also started to fade immediately. Ugh. I crawled towards Dawson with minimum light. With about 15 miles to go I met Jin and Daniel (both 430, foot) who had spare batteries that actually worked which they kindly gave me.



Able to see again I rode off and the long mining road came to an end at a junction – civilisation! I turned along the trail towards Dawson, still following the markers and happily anticipating a gentle ride into Dawson along the riverfront looking at the buildings. But in a last sting the trail dropped down onto the river yet again. The surface was churned up and too soft to ride. Yet another push for the last 2 miles or so. I was very disappointed. At last the trail curved back up the river bank. I hopped back on and rode the last part of the trail towards the finish line. It was before dawn but Robert, Diane and the volunteers were there cheering. I crossed the line. And stopped.

10 days 21 hours. 2nd biker. 1st female. By the grace of God.

I was probably the only competitor carrying a small gold handbag. Hung round my neck under my clothes it held phone, headtorch and batteries . Made sense to me but caused lots of amusement. Thanks handbag!



I could not have completed the 430 YAU without help from:

- Andy Heading – arctic racing expert and superb sports photographer.
- Mark Redwood at TFN Nottingham who serviced the fatbike and gave me advice when the brake failed
- Josh and Jonah at Icycle in Whitehorse who winterised the fatbike and provided the wheels and advice
- The snowmobile drivers, volunteers and medics – a fantastic team. Particular thanks to Diane, Lucy, Sue, Adam, Julie, Jessica, Jo, Stewart, Glenn, Ross, Greg, the irrepressible Yann and, of course, Robert
- Fellow competitors whose kindness, sense of humour and friendship kept me going – thanks to Andy, Enrico, Hanno, Gavin, Shane, Matt, Jon, Tom, Daniel, Jin, Scott, Steve and the awe-inspiring Jessie
- And thanks to Nicole and staff at the Coast High Country Inn who, among other things, found me a room when there was no room!
- God

I am so grateful to my husband Mike and children Ben, Jamie, Hannah and John for their unwavering love and support.

This race was a spiritual experience as much as a physical and mental challenge. It took me to my limits, and then expanded them. God, as ever, had the last word. To Him be the glory.