

Canoes of Fire

It was a dark and stormy morning; each team was timidly getting their boat set up for the 18 mile leg of the 40th annual White River Canoe Race. Ruth and I were busy filling our camelbacks, zipping our PFDs, and making sure our boat didn't fill up with water before we even began paddling. Tave or Gustavo Oscar Lamperez "da turd" as some of us like to call him, was perched atop his rock of power armed with a mega-phone and clipboard. "If the lightning comes more than 12 seconds apart don't continue paddling, pull over to the bank," he warned us as we eased our boat into the freezing water.

Ruth and I had no competition yet again for the women's cruising division, but neither did the coed team from Minnesota, so we raced each other. As we paddled up to the start it became increasingly obvious that this would not be the most pleasant race that any of us ever had to endure. However, we persevered and rocketed off at the sound of the starter pistol. It wasn't long before the lightening grew not 12 seconds, but 5 seconds apart. "Do you think we should pull over?" asked Ruth in a concerned voice. "We're Venture Crew 300, we don't stop." I replied. "The only reason we'll stop is if it starts hailing or if our boat sinks." Then the bottom dropped out of the sky. The rain cascaded down our faces and into our eyes. There was an up side though, we never had to take a drink, instead we just opened our mouths and let the rain run in.

We were dodging rocks and logs like they were traffic cones. Visibility was so low that we were having trouble seeing objects until we got right up on them. Suddenly off on the left bank we saw two dark figures huddled under a tree. It was Thomas S. and Nick S. from our boys novice aluminum team. "What are you guys doing?" I yelled. "I totally said 'Venture Crew 300 does not stop' like 20 pages ago!" All I heard in reply was something that sounded like, "mahamwahahahaawhawhsahs LIGHTENING!" So we left them there on the river bank. They weren't the only ones, before the race was over we saw 2/3 of the teams on the side of the river.

Ruth and I had started the race with our small 1X1/2" bailer open. With a monsoon raining down upon us it wasn't doing much good. The water in my end was well over my ankles and slowly working its way up to my hips. Since Ruthie is heavier than I am most of the water went to the bow, needless to say she was about to drown without even falling in the river. I decided that having this much water in the boat qualified as sinking so we pulled over to the nearest bank. When we stepped out of the boat the mud rose up mid-calf. Fearing that we would sink further we quickly attempted dumping the boat. It took a couple of tries before we could raise the water logged canoe over our head. Finally we succeeded and disappeared back into the tick blanket of fog.

After what seemed like an eternity we finally saw the bridge in the distance that marked the finish line. When we got out of the boat our moms were waiting for us with warm towels, dry clothes, and a big table of food. I couldn't have been more relieved. Although the race was difficult it was also fun because it was a challenge and tested our strength and endurance. However, I don't think I'd ever want to paddle another leg like that again. Fortunately, conditions were perfect for the remaining races of the day and the next day.