

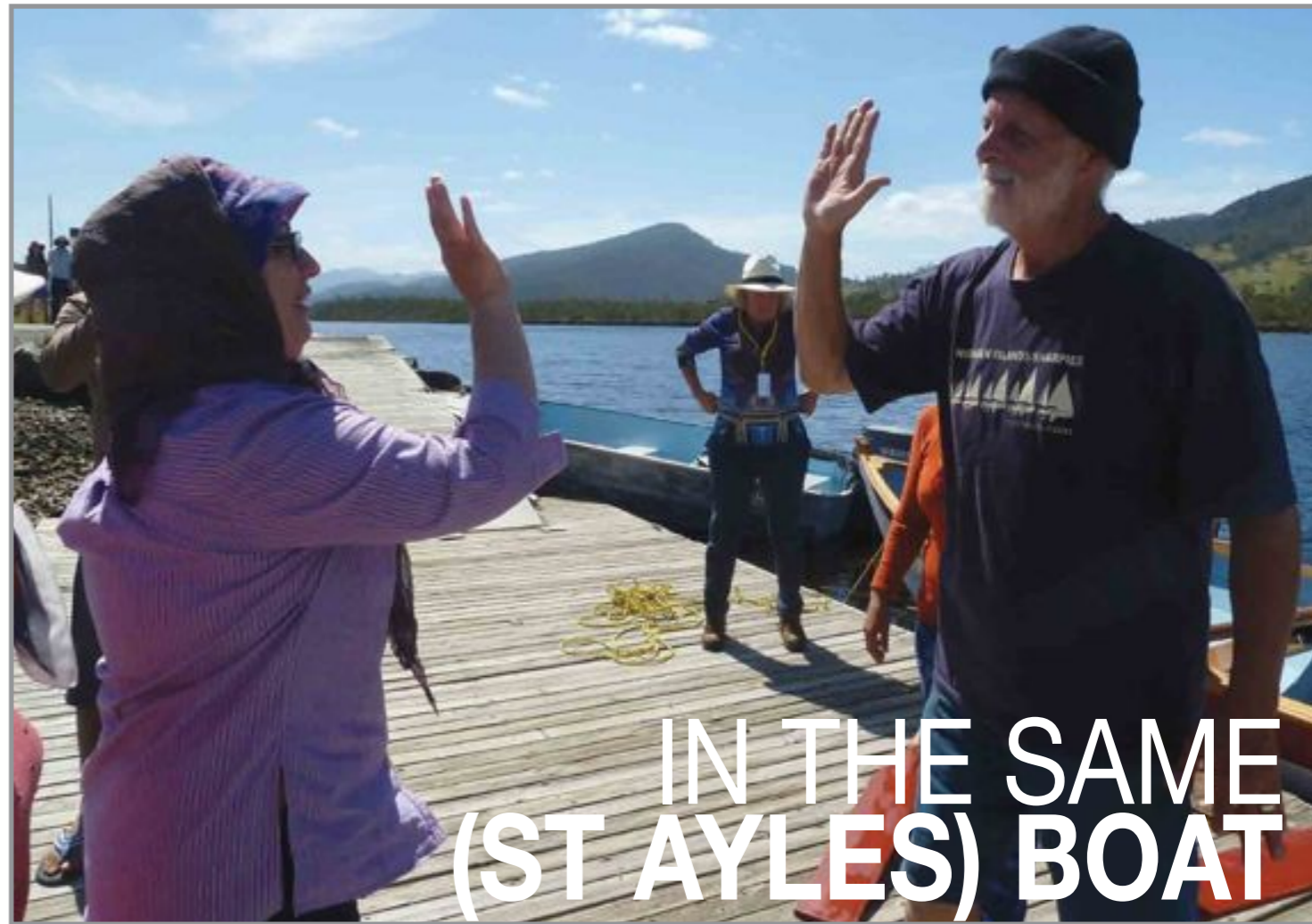
AUSTRALASIAN AMATEUR BOATBUILDER & KITBOATS

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IN THE SAME (ST AYLES) BOAT

Foroozan and Robert (with beanie) on the wharf, Franklin.



Leila, Hussein, Emir, Little Mohammad and cox, Robert, pushing off Fishermans Wharf, Hobart for the first race.

BY ROBERT AYLIFFE

The beanie started it.

Ali convinced me to go to an Adelaide church precinct, because they had boat people there who might be interested in building boats.

The irony piqued my interest.

So did the church.

There's a banner hung proudly across its imposing neo gothic front: 'JESUS WAS A REFUGEE'

The Clayton Wesley Uniting Church sits on the corner of Portrush Rd, more or less astride Norwood Parade, a leafy, trendy eastern suburbs shopping boulevard close to Adelaide.

All the Beemers, Range Rovers, Ferraris and Lamborghinis, making their way home to their eastern suburbs cribs have to contemplate that message on a nightly basis.

Edgy.

They also have a top op shop, 'Goodies', purveyors of excellent op shop stuff and, beanies.

While buying the beanie, I was accosted by David Winderlich, an employee of Uniting Communities who has a strong involvement in social action and especially refugee advocacy circles.

You know about boats, come with me.



RIGHT: Racing line up, Franklin - Chiton foreground, Cariad, John Liddy, Wee Tawera and Black Swan in the background.

BELOW RIGHT: Malaysian students, Iman Sabri (glasses, centre). Hajar, Leila, Emir, lower left, welcomes us all to Tasmania. Anything we can help with just call! Have a great regatta!

This church stands on a big patch of real estate. There is a tired looking double garage on the northwestern side.

Here, said David, is where you are going to help build some boats.

Ali had told him about the St Ayles Skiff program. With Boat People.

No I'm not.

As if by magic, a half dozen Iranian refugees joined us expressing interest in David's suggestion. Weakening, but only slightly, I said that I would not consider the project if it was going to be men only. Women must also be involved with the building.

From both the men and women, let's do this!

I lamely protested, "this is not a done deal".

Come to Hope Café, Robert?

Hope Café is a fundraiser for the many social activities that the Church and Uniting Communities provide. Open at lunchtime Wednesdays and Fridays, the café is staffed by volunteers and volunteer refugees. It's welcoming to anyone who would like to take advantage of good low cost food, really good coffee and interesting social interactions.

Patrons (and some volunteers) are mainly from the Middle East, some from Asia, some from Afghanistan and a lot from Iran. Most have been released from detention centres, pending decisions on deportation, work permits and the like, all clinging to Australia by their fingernails.



All backgrounds; labourers, electricians, carpenters, lawyers, dentists, doctors, engineers, social workers, educators, theologians, house cleaners, religious refugees. The café is a bustling work place, too, with local lawyers, dentists, doctors, social workers, all working pro bono with the refugee group.

It is possible to be indifferent to that which we don't want to see.

We so easily brush aside inconvenient truths on the altar of life's busyness, there's work, there's not going sailing enough and there's that family of our own out there that also need our focus.

However, once you've seen something, you cannot unsee it, once you have met people, it's very hard to unmeet them.

Rev Paul Turley gets that. He's always buzzing around the café, as is David Winderlich, both walking the tricky tightrope of engagement with varied and sometimes conflicting constituencies.

A flicker of flame burned. A name for the mission appeared.

IN THE SAME BOAT

Pat Groot, coordinator of the Warnambool Hospital Stroke Recovery unit had just received their two St Ayles kits, for use in the hospital's unique Stroke Recovery Program.

His team intended to create a mini wooden boat festival on the village green, celebrating the start of the St Ayles Kit project.

The Warnambool rationale was born out of a local rowed whaleboat tradition that has been maintained by enthusiastic locals to the present day. Pat contacted the Rev Jim Barr and I to help contribute to a welcome celebrating the arrival of the kits into their community and as way of raising awareness of stroke recovery, the kits and their purpose in the community.

Jim Barr's congregation had just fished their St Ayles Skiff, *Cariad*.

Armfields Slip had just finished their St Ayles Skiff, *John Liddy*.

Jim rang me suggesting that rather than being two ageing crocs at a gabfest, I might be able to borrow the Goolwa St Ayles Skiff, *John Liddy*, and he negotiate with his parish and bring '*Cariad*, so we'd



The Rev Jim Barr. Jim's vision, and the support of Chris Holding and Willie Ow of the Melbourne Welsh Church congregation, made so much possible, for so many. In addition Jim's practical skills at sea, and on land smoothed the rugged three day voyage back to Franklin, as well as making a terrific contribution to the running of the Franklin festival. legend!

bring not just ourselves, but the actual boats to the event.

Seemed like a plan!

That spurred me to suggest to David Winderlich that he get HIS act together and test the interest of the refugees by inviting them to come too. If they didn't want to come, then, great, that got me out of a job. If they did, then David's and, as I now realise, Ali's idea might be a goer afterall.

I was concerned that the refugees' initial interest may have been because David had sold the idea too well, and they may have been humouring us rather than really wanting to do the project.

After all, for most of them, their recent boating experience had not been encouraging.

At what was very short notice, and with the help of a very generous \$500 travel donation from the Scots Church in Adelaide, 12 Iranians turned up in Warnambool.

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ABOVE: Bow to stern: (Big) Mohammad, Leila, Forooza and Mehdi.
LEFT: Zainab, our Tasmanian angel of the impossible. Introducing Zainab to our mob, was the great gift of Mahammad Noor. Thanks Mahammad! As a result of the visit of Team Iran, and her engagement with them and support of us all, Zainab is now a valued member of the WOW group in Franklin.



So did about 300 local Warnamboolians, Port Faireyites, Portlanders and farmers from around the district, along with four or five really big whaleboats, and several local quality home built small boats. It was a great day, a great mini wooden boat festival on the green, and some surprises.

The arrival of the skiffs was a hit; it gave inspiration because people could see, touch and in many cases get to row the finished products.

Pat made a great speech, and then introduced Jim and me.

Both of us made reference to the idea that people that build boats, build more than boats. They build a community.

Looking out from the dais at the refugees in front of our two boats I realised that without even building the boats, there was already a community effect. Here was this group of people who had gone through unspeakable experiences to be with us, and who were now struggling with every essence of their being to be to stay with us and be contributing citizens, and they were here because of the boats. I used this observation as the basis of my response, then started to introduce each of the group by name.

Before I could finish cheering and clapping broke out. Later one of the farmers approached us, saying, liked what you fellas said. Then a pause. Would you like to come to a farmer's barbecue, only 40 minutes or so out of town?

Now, this is western districts Victoria. I admit to thinking 'Deliverance'.

These guys?

Gesturing to the refugee group.

Of course.

The barbecue was a long way out of town in a small, rural hall. Farmers utes and 4WD's scattered around; lots of people.

And lots of people who were also refugees.

When I asked a farmer if they were giving the refugees work, he asked, are you from the bloody tax office?

How wide spread is this?

Well he said, drawing a line in the grass with his boot, there's the Indian Ocean, and turning, there's the other one!

In that moment I had an overwhelming sense of love for my country.

David Winderlich wandered over to me during that evening and muttered that he'd been a bit unsure of the value of this trip, but that it had suddenly become really worthwhile.

First he said, it's been good for 'our guys' to make contact with their mates in the 'regions', which could be helpful in their visa struggle. And second he was carrying a promised donation of 5K to get 'our' group, should they be interested, to Hobart in February 2015 to experience the rowing and building further.

I was stunned.

Alec Jordan's original St Ayles Community Rowing vision was heading in ways that he could not have dreamt – or maybe he did!

I grabbed Rev Jim Barr and repeated the news that 'some character' had spotted the possibility and come

up with a promise of 5K to get our mob to Hobart for the Australian Wooden Boat Festival, and the inaugural St Ayles Skiff regatta being held over four days in Franklin the week following the festival.

Jim said, That's right, Robert. 'That character' would be my congregation!

Something else became apparent. Both Rev Jim Barr, and Rev Paul Turley have never once suggested that there was some kind of religious price for their, or their congregation's support.

We see a need, and guided by OUR faith, and our community, we are here to do what we can, seems to be their creed.

It is wholly admirable.

The ensuing months were a roller coaster. A core group from the Warrnambool trip, nine people, were able, and strongly wanted to get to Hobart. I started pricing airfares, and organising billeting, through the wonderful, visionary and energetic Jane Johnson and her friends, contacting potential local support people and so on.

About four weeks prior to departure disaster struck. I had a couple of well meaning phone calls from professional social workers in Tasmania, warning me off the enterprise.

You might be sleeping where? On beaches? On the floor of a disused apple shed? In tents? What are you thinking?

Do you know what religion each person is? What will you do if a fight breaks out between different religious and political groups?

You are out of your depth!

This should be called off immediately; it's a disaster waiting to happen. You won't get any professionals in this area to travel with you; I had already found that that was not going to happen, for other reasons from the Adelaide end either. If I did do this, it would be in the clear knowledge that I would be on my own.

For once in my life I stepped back from the brink, and



The Kiwi Boats, Frank Worsley and Wee Tawera, at rest, Franklin.

after speaking with some other Tasmanian locals I considered the implications for David and the church, not to mention the condition of my own hide.

I called the Rev Paul Turley at Wesley church and told him that I had been talked into pulling the pin. I met with an interpreter with my Iranian friends and, while dismayed, they understood. Or at least SAID they did.

I stopped the airline tickets and let Jim know that it was not happening. He too was disappointed, but also understood.

Because of my role with the St Ayles Skiff and other kit boat promotion and my special involvement with Bote-Cote epoxy resins and Aquacote paints, I was booked to go to Hobart and the Franklin Rowing Festival regardless.

Ten days out from my departure I had to call Jane Johnson on St Ayles Skiff regatta details. In the conversation she asked how many Iranians are coming. I thought you knew, I said.

I did not know, and I won't now! This is nuts, get your act together Robert! We WANT them here!

Jane is subtle and persuasive.

I spoke with my wife, Ali. Ali asked what's the worst thing that can

happen? I could think of a few scenarios. Paul Turly was more directive.

Robert, you are talking about people who have made their way here risking their lives on a daily basis, getting out of their countries in the first place, transit camps en route, surviving sinking boats and in many cases clinging to toothpicks to survive in the Indian ocean, detention centre life, and so on.

This just does not compare.

Stuff the worrywarts, just do it and be off with you!

At this late time the airline tickets were going to be 900 each. Both the Firefly bus company and the *Spirit of Tasmania* Ferry were much better. The tickets were \$45 each way, and the overnight Firefly bus from Adelaide to Melbourne the same.

BUT they both wanted to sight the refugee groups' 'papers' and wanted to know all their names and details etc. No papers. Not sure I can spell all their names either.

Blocked again!

The great 'Spirit', in the *Spirit of Tasmania*, rose up and said why don't we make them all part of your family?

Make them, What?

So it came to pass.

The *Spirit of Tasmania* sailed on February 2, 2015 Monday, on the daylight crossing with Robert Ayliffe, (big) Mohammad Ayliffe, (little) Mohammad Ayliffe, Amir Ayliffe, Hossein Ayliffe, Foroozan Ayliffe, Mahdi Ayliffe Leila Ayliffe, Hajar Ayliffe, and Amir Ayliffe on its manifest.

Our arrival in Hobart was a special joy. Waiting on the forecourse of Constitution dock was a small army of Malaysian students, my Muslim childhood friend Mahammed Noor, a friend of his, later to become our angel of the impossible, Zainab, and the Hobart Imam, Sabri Samson.

Big smiles, outstretched hands of welcome and joy at our arrival.

"Welcome to Hobart, have a great festival all of you, anything you need just sing out!

Oh, and by the way if you want to come to Mosque on Friday. All are welcome!

So much for the Sunni Shia divide in Australia! And the local newspaper was there to record it.

This was starting to be fun.

The welcome in Hobart ran on longer than planned, and I was a bit worried that we did not have enough car space to get every one down to Franklin in one go, and in daylight.

In what I now know to be the Tasmanian way, cars and drivers were rolling up as we stood around talking. Luggage and people dispersed.

By the time we all got to Franklin it was dark, the very

cold rain had set in, we had no accommodation that we could access except our unfamiliar tents, a few mattresses that we had used as padding between the three boats, and fairly minimal sleeping bags.

I was about to start explaining how to put the tents up when I noticed that the tents were already sorted. Not only that, little Mohammad had scrounged some wood, and Hossein got busy chopping it up. He found a disused heater and got a fire going, and several others produced pots that they had secreted in their luggage.

In a taste of what was to come over the next days, food was under way.

Richard Forster, the treasurer and who was to prove our miracle worker at the Living Boat Trust, checked in on us around midnight, and noted that we might be a 'bit cold', and that there was not much fire wood. In the morning we woke to engine noise outside the tents, and one tonne of split timber being unloaded for our use. A little after that a van turned up with what was for all the world the bedding department of David Jones stores.

St Ayles grapevine of goodwill in full swing!

Later that morning we unloaded the boats, and got a rowing training program going, using *Cariad*, and *John Liddy*.

For a while, enthusiasm triumphed over skill, their struggle with English and my

lack of Farzi did not help. The women and the men were equally keen, and soon a hint of rhythm and timing started to assert itself.

We came in at about lunchtime to find a significant group of tourists sitting down to a makeshift outdoor dining table, with Foroozan, Haja, Leila, Mehdi, Zainab and Big Mohammad welcoming them, the workers at the Living Boat Trust, and anyone else who was popping by to middle eastern al fresco dining, in glorious Franklin sunlight. Language seemed secondary, the communication was bright, and the food perfect.

More rowing in the afternoon, with excellent training assistance from Richard.

The next day I had to put on my work hat. I joined my comrades setting up the Bote-Cote stand in

preparation for the opening of the Australian Wooden Boat Festival, with its projected 200,000 plus onslaught the next day.

One of my colleagues, Roi is an Israeli army veteran.

He was strongly troubled when, about six weeks before the festival, I mentioned to him that I might have this comets' trail of middle eastern refugee friends travelling with me.

Not talking to any bloody Muslim. I've tried to kill a lot of them, and they have tried to kill me. Keep them away from me.

I like Roi, very much. I'm old enough to know that we are all shaped by experience, and old enough to know that sometimes its better to just leave it.

For a while, anyway.

We finished our festival set up early. Roi wondered what we might do for the rest of the day. I asked him if he'd ever been down to Franklin.

No.

Would you like to?

Great.

It was now mid day. Forty minutes to Franklin.

As we drove into the Living Boat Trust area the first thing Roi noticed was our tents scattered around, and a fire going, in front of the LBT workshop.

People camping here?

Yep.

Now Roi, while I unload the car, just go straight into the LBT kitchen, go straight to the fridge and get a tray of sandwiches and bring them out so we can eat. But be quick, I'm famished!

As I get to the kitchen door, this loud shout: You bastard, you have set me up!

I see several things. Three colourful Hijabs; Foroozan, Leila and Hajar, and two men Big Mohammad and Amir, chopping up Halal like there is no tomorrow.

And Roi. Roi is not happy at all. Roi has gone into the kitchen so far that by the time he realises his situation it is simply too late.

One of the women breaks the tension. You are from the middle east!

Roi snaps, Yes! How do you know.

Your accent. Where are you from?

Guess.

A number of countries are mentioned, until finally Roi barks.

Israel!

The five Iranians take a half pace back, then in complete silence they move toward Roi, and, as one hug him.

Roi looks at me in shock and confusion. As they hug him, one word.

Welcome.

With that Hajar, I think it was who is about 140cm tall reaches up, puts her hands on Roi's shoulders, and like the good mother says, young man! You look tired and angry

and hungry, steering him to the table, pushing him down into a seat.

Now. eat!

Everyone at the table has heard and seen the exchange, visitors, LBT workers, the other Iranians. Stunned silence.



Hossein chops the firewood, Franklin.



Team Iran, reading to rumble!

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As the food came out, Mehdi, who had been a theology lecturer in Teheran, stood up.

In halting English:

I have to speak.

Looking up and down the silent table:

We are at this table today. We are at least two kinds of Christian. We have a Chinese friend. We have people here who don't believe that there is a god. We have a Zoroastrian. We have Shia and Sunni. And we have our Jew.

OUR Israeli!

We are here in peace.

LONG may this be so!

The next day, I had to go up to be part of opening our show display in Hobart, doing Aquacote demos. The Iranians were planning to get rides up later in the day after a bit more rowing practice.

The crowds were huge. We were really busy.

Then, the crowd parted.

There is nothing like a couple of Hijabs to attract attention, Team Iran had arrived, arrived, carrying teapots and middle eastern sweet cakes, and set themselves up in our stand.

The first person to greet them, was my friend, Roi!

We had mobs of people join us. What a hit the day was! What interest the stand had. What easy acceptance and welcome was extended by all of the Bote-Cote crew, and everyone, from Tasmania and beyond, who came to our stand.

On the last day of the four day festival, the St Ayles demonstration sprint racing was on, and for the Iranians, truth time! This excellent event was the brainchild of Robert Lucas, 'Hobart Regatta' Director.

The racing was a wonderful churning of crews in and out of boats, fast and furious. Boats came and went, crews waiting on Fishermans Walk for their turn, heading out through the throng of boats coming in, then out to the start line and racing the 200m or so short course sprints, in front of thousands of people lining the docks.

To keep it simple we billed our mob as the Iranian National Coastal Rowing Team, which since by now most people in Tasmania seemed to know the back story, got cheering and encouragement, as it turned out in inverse proportion to their racing success.

They never won a race, no trophies were collected, but the roar of the onlookers made no doubt that hearts were.

ABOVE RIGHT: The silent table.

RIGHT: Jane Johnson (peak cap, centre) directing traffic, Franklin. A wonderful churning of crews, in and out of boats!

We did not know it at the time but in that crowd was the governor of Tasmania, Professor Kate Warner.

Amidst the cacophony of the racing, a message come down asking all the rowers, including the Iranians, to a reception and a prize giving with the governor,

A very pleasant event with prizes, speeches and a bit of fun. Team Iran was in the front row. The formalities over, the governor's white uniformed security detail whisked her away. I stayed and chatted with friends for a while, then realised that Team Iran were nowhere to be seen.

On exiting the building the first thing I spotted was the seeming discomfort of the governor's security detail.

For there she was, surrounded by the Iranians, the women with their arms around her, cameras clicking all over the place, and all of them trying to talk with



Team Iran with Kate Warner (centre) Governor of Tasmania.

a very friendly and highly amused Kate Warner! The governor clearly entered into the spirit of it all and seemed to be having, to the apparent alarm of her security detail, a perfectly happy time.

She was not about to be rushed.

Finally the security people took her by the arm and walked her to the big Mercedes and vanished into the Hobart afternoon.

It was an experience that spoke volumes about the people of Tasmania, and their Governor.

Following the festival, the next 'bridge' to cross was the long (70km) row back from Hobart, to Franklin for the inaugural southern hemisphere international St Ayles (Skiffie) Regatta.

All of the Iranian National rowing team were up for it, as were the irrepressible New Zealanders, Mike Mahoney, Baden Pascoe and Steve Cranchas well as the Welsh Church's Jim Barr, Chris Holding and Willie Ow, who were to do mighty work managing the Team Iran blisters, exhaustion, and general well being of everyone on (and off) the water.

Sometimes when wind, tide and chill conspired to break the spirit and the timing Jim made excellent calls on our tow boat. No macho nuttiness here, and what a great time was had. From the first evening at Randalls Bay the Persian skill at producing banquets from two rocks and glass of water with no kitchen to speak of was astounding, and eagerly looked forward to by all of us.

On the third night we were all to be sleeping on the floor of the old apple shed in Brooks Bay, and after we had settled in the now familiar herbs and spices of Persian cooking were in the air, a hobbit-like atmosphere made more interesting by the low lighting, the long makeshift tables and the 30 or so rowers and support crews, the fabulous middle eastern food encouraging people to eat, and eat we really did. This was the last night of the epic journey to Franklin,

and there was a strong sense having been through something together, bridging religious, cultural and historical differences, and the sharing of such a wide range of life experiences and knowledge.

Toward the end of that meal, little Mohammad started to clap, with strong rhythm and increasing intensity. Soon the men and the women followed him, now with chanting and singing. It was loud and powerful and joyous, and the men started to dance. Pretty soon most people, and then the Kiwis.

It was such a night.

The great story of the Inaugural Franklin St Ayles 'Skiffie' Regatta is well described in Jonathan Wallis' story page 68 this issue.

Suffice it to say that Team Iran rowed their hearts out, and sniffed success at times, but an actual race victory eluded them. Once again though, they won something greater, the enduring friendship and respect of the 400 or so rowers present, all that met them there and witnessed their tenacity and optimism.

One of the people in Tasmania who had initially warned us not to go ahead with the trip approached me on the last day, saying something to the effect that, I was wrong, this has been a great success, for everyone. Congratulations to all of you.

That was nice.

As we were packing up, Mike Mahoney drifted across ask what obstacles lay in the path of getting the proposed 'in the same boat' refugee St Ayles Skiff Boat building project off the ground at The Clayton Wesley Uniting Church in Adelaide, and whether he could help with funding.

We Kiwis have all really enjoyed these guys company, and we recognise a worthwhile project when we see one. If you need financial help, just call.

A building demountable tunnel is being selected, benches and some tools have been offered, local donors and experienced St Ayles Skiff builders including Gary Combe and Bob Jennings from Armfield Slip in Goolwa are mobilising. We hope to be commencing construction as early as August.

Curious? Come to Hope Café from midday to around 2pm, especially on a Friday.

But be warned. Your life may not be the same again.

And I still have that beanie.



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