

# Yukon Arctic Ultra Feb 2015

## Pre-race

Early in January 2015 I took the final decision to attempt the 430 mile Yukon Arctic Ultra by bike.

Later that same day I was diagnosed with glaucoma and cataracts. Immediate treatment was two hourly eye drops plus more morning and evening. I reacted badly to the treatment and the dream was disappearing fast along with my sight.

I had laser surgery to reduce the chances of problems during the race (and the need for eye drops) and was finally cleared to race just four days before I flew out to Whitehorse.

I made new friends and meet up with old ones at the airport and in Whitehorse. There were five other bikers attempting the 430 and listening to them I had that old 'fish out of water' feeling again.

Once in Whitehorse it was the usual round of visits to Icycle to get the bike winterised and sorted, buy race food, hand-warmers, missing kit and all those unnecessary impulse buys. Except this time there was a serious note – the temperatures in the city were around -35 and dropping. Out on the trail it would be even colder. Canadian TV were giving out frostbite warnings; the race organisers were talking of extra foot, face and hand checks.

The pre-race briefing was another reality check. Not only was the extreme cold over the first few days going to be a challenge but there were warnings of the trail diversions and overflow.



*Yukon River at Whitehorse*

My only plan for the race was to start out and see how I felt and how far I could go. As usual I was under-trained. "You'll ride into it" my friends had said. I was about to find out if that was true.

Although my training for the race had been inadequate, I had two advantages. Firstly friends with extensive arctic racing experience had drilled me on frostbite prevention, given me all sorts of useful advice, lent kit and answered all my silly questions. And secondly I knew I had many, many people praying for me. I couldn't do it in my own strength but in God's strength I just might.

It was a great privilege to be Race Chaplain for the YAU, and one of the special moments for me was the pre-race prayer meeting which was truly multi-faith.

Mileages given are from the trail notes – the actual distance this year was around 450 miles

*My race is dedicated to the memory of my friend, Lesley Barthorpe*

## Leg 1 – Whitehorse to Rivendell (26 miles)

I was dreading the start. I like to be at the back in races, but with a relatively hard trail I knew I had to be at the front with the other bikers, and as the only female biker I couldn't hide. And it was cold, very cold.



*Ready for the start*

After the official photos and countdown we were off. Thank God I didn't fall off at the start. I tucked in behind Australian Tim Sommers (430 bike) for a while – not exactly drafting, more hiding behind him.

Remembering all the advice I had been given I was constantly zipping and unzipping jackets, checking feet, hands and the little of

my face that was exposed. Hands in and out of pogies, walk and stomp to keep the feet warm. The only real problem was my eyelashes which kept icing up then freezing together till ice and lashes came off in a lump.

The 26 miles to Rivendell was along the Yukon then Takhini rivers – a narrow trail but flat and relatively easy riding so sometime in the afternoon I pushed the bike up a steep slope and through the heavy snow to the Rivendell checkpoint – a hut with a fire outside – no going indoors here. Volunteer Lucy met me with hot chocolate and soup but I was distressed to find fellow British biker Andy Gregory (430) struggling to keep warm. His core temperature had dropped and despite all his efforts hypothermia had set in. Sadly his race was over prematurely.

It was time to move on and get off the river before night fell and the temperature dropped further.

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

After eight or nine miles I left the river heading for Dog Grave Lake. The flat section was over and I hit the first climbs of the race. These were gradual at first but then steeper. On through the woods by the light of the headtorch as I pedalled and walked through the night.

But it was so cold; an icy, dangerous cold that attacked any unprotected skin. I had icicle eyelashes but every other bit of skin was covered. Later I heard the temperature had dropped to -48. The batteries on my spot tracker froze solid.



I went up the steep climb I remembered so well from previous races. Push the bike a few steps, brake and wait until the heart rate went down. Don't sweat, keep it slow and steady.

Eventually I pushed the bike up the last steep slope and into the Dog Grave Lake checkpoint sometime during the night. After soup and sausage, hot chocolate and cake from volunteers Jessica and Mike I

was feeling fine. A couple of hours sleep in the tent and I was ready to go.

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

With dawn the cold eased its grip slightly. This section was enjoyable – daylight, relatively easy riding and no major climbs. But there was a lot of snowmobile activity, and at one point I passed someone on a stretcher waiting for a helicopter airlift out, and others waiting to be snowmobiled to a checkpoint because of frostbite or hypothermia.

Eventually I started the descent into the many miles of woods before the drop down onto Braeburn Lake just before the next checkpoint. It was starting to get dark so I got my headtorch and heavier facemask ready. The headtorch came on, and then suddenly went off. I changed the batteries but still no light. So I found the backup torch – which came on, flickered, danced around a bit then settled to a steady, very dim light. Then it went out too. I still had a couple of hours of dusk, could I make it to Braeburn?

The 'beat the dark' race started – whilst still keeping an eye on sweating/chilling/food/drink. I met snowmobile driver Ross going to fetch some more racers. He thought I would probably make it but to be careful in the woods after the lake.

I crossed the lake as it got dark. Only just over a mile to go now and I could hear the occasional car on the road by the checkpoint. But where did the trail go? It was twisting and turning in the tight packed woods with short but very steep climbs and descents. I left the bike on the trail and retraced my steps to the last known marker, by the lake. Then came slowly back, feeling for the trail with my feet. The next climb was too steep to push the bike up so I unloaded sleeping bag and bike bag and pushed it up and then went back down for the bags. But it was cold, so cold. The tips of my fingers were starting to feel numb. Immediate remedial action was needed – NOW. Remembering what I had been taught I put my hands under my armpits, wiggled my fingers and jumped on the spot to keep the feet warm. After a few minutes the hands were warm enough to undo the clips on my panniers. Hands back under the armpits and jump. Then get my down booties out of the panniers

and onto my hands. Hands back under armpits and jump. I repeated this until my hands were warm, the bike was reloaded and I could continue to feel my way out of the woods.

As I emerged from the woods into the light of Braeburn Lodge I realised I had a second problem – I couldn't see. My vision had clouded and the lights from headtorches and snowmobiles created a blaze of light. I couldn't see anything.

Someone took me into the checkpoint and Andy Gregory, now acting as a volunteer, guided me to a seat. His consideration and kindness made a difficult time so much easier. I was fine except for the



Photo: Derek Crowe

Arrival at Braeburn

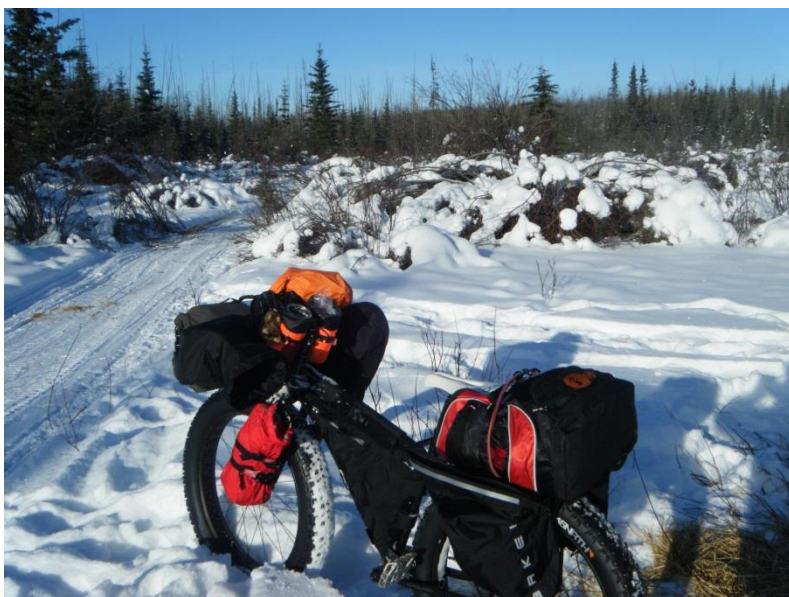
loss of vision caused by me working so hard to get to the checkpoint that my contact lenses had prevented sufficient oxygen getting through to my eyes. In a few hours they would recover.

Braeburn Lodge looked like a war zone. Athletes were sitting around being cared for by the medical team and volunteers. More serious frostbite cases were taken to hospital by medic Diane. Others were receiving treatment there.

Andy showed me to a cabin where I could sleep. Tim Sommers was already there in another bed. His comment summed up the race so far "Brutal, just brutal".

#### **Leg 4 – Braeburn to Ken Lake (44 miles)**

After a few hours sleep, an enormous Braeburn Lodge breakfast and the loan of Andy Gregory's headtorch I left in daylight for the long ride to Ken Lake. Tim Sommers had left ahead of me so I just followed his tracks - up and over the big hill we had been told we could go round – thanks Tim! The sun was out and apart from a few painful hills it was a nice ride and I was getting faster at the unload, climb hill, reload technique. The lakes seem endless but were much more enjoyable on a bike than on foot. Lunch was quiet and peaceful and I liked the convenience of being able to park the bike in a snowdrift.



*Stopped for lunch*

There were more lakes, more hills, more woods, more trail and now and again some overflow which I walked carefully through although with my big boots and crampons it was no problem. Night was coming and it seemed a very long way to Ken Lake.

The trail was mesmerising at night with just the narrow track, snowbanks on either side, illuminated by the headtorch on low to save batteries. The world

could be coming to an end either side of me and I wouldn't know. Riding was more risky than walking – any wobble and I was in the snowbank up to knee or thigh.

Somewhere along the trail in the dark one of the crampons on my boot jammed against the pedal. I toppled sideways into an ungainly heap in the snow. To get up I had to remove the crampon from my boot since the spikes of the crampon were locked into the metal spikes on the pedal. I found the duct tape and fixed the rest of the crampon to the bottom of the pedal so I could still ride. Later I stopped to walk and discovered the crampon had disappeared. No point going back because it could have flown off into the woods but this was serious because it was mandatory kit and I couldn't see the organiser, Robert, letting me do the full distance with just one crampon.

Eventually, just as I was thinking I'd missed the checkpoint, I saw a headtorch in the distance. Volunteer Graham had seen me and come down to welcome me in. His help was much appreciated.

Ken Lake checkpoint had a cabin for the volunteers, a wall tent for athletes to eat and dry clothes in and a sleeping area outside near the fire. The tent and food were great but the sleeping area was not. It sloped downwards and to the side so I constantly slid off downhill. After a couple of hours sleep I woke to find I was covered with snow – time to move on. Marianne (430 foot) arrived just before I left.

Graham found a single screw which he inserted into the sole of my boot. A crampon on one boot, and a single screw on the other – would that be enough grip to get me over some steep climbs to Carmacks?

Tim had left a couple of hours earlier, and the snow was easing so I could follow his tracks once again.

## **Leg 5 - Ken Lake to Carmacks (35 miles)**

Back down onto the lake, up a steep climb, through the woods and down onto another lake. That set the pattern for 15 miles or so. The snow had settled but was very powdery so I could follow Tim's

tracks easily, and those of the two athletes on foot, Neil (300) and Joel (430), who had also left earlier.

My body was starting to object to working so hard. After an hour of riding the right knee would hurt, then the left would join in. Two fingers of my left hand were starting to go numb after so much pressure on the handlebars and brake, but there no need for painkillers yet.

Eventually I reached the endless woods that ran alongside the Yukon River. The trail through the woods was up and down like a never-ending 'Big Dipper' fairground ride. I was constantly on and off the bike, riding then pushing. Downhills that would have been great fun in the UK had to be taken carefully since a bad fall could be dangerous. I perfected the 'speedway slide' – front wheel pointing downhill, back wheel sliding round to provide extra control and braking. I knew my mis-spent youth at the speedway track would have a use sometime!

Twice the trail took us down to the Yukon River to cross the jumble ice. I didn't even attempt to ride because a fall risked cracking my head open on the uneven, jagged blocks of ice. I'd passed Neil and



Joel earlier but now they caught up with me again. Joel was struggling with back problems and was short on water and trail food so we shared supplies and teamed up together. I did have an ulterior motive because I could remember two more really steep climbs on this stretch, and help with the bike would mean I didn't have to unload. Neil was looking very strong and was exceptionally good at motivating us to work together – impressive.

It was dark by the time we emerged from the forest onto a lake and then were blinded by the lights of the Japanese camera crew. They might have known where the trail was but we couldn't see it because of the lights in our faces. But we made it into Carmacks to be welcomed by chief medic Diane and the volunteers.

The Carmacks checkpoint was a recreation centre. We could eat indoors, sleep indoors and, best of all, have a shower. At that moment it was the nearest thing to Heaven I could imagine.

The volunteers looked after us well, particularly Lucy, Phillipa (430 foot, scratched through cold) and Christoph, a doctor (430 ski, scratched through injury) who confirmed that my numb hand was just caused by pressure on the handlebars and would ease after a few months. Thankfully race organiser Robert had a spare pair of crampons he offered me.

Tim was already here, sleeping upstairs, and Marianne Heading also came in. She was looking good but suffering greatly from blisters.

I slept for a few hours then woke, drank hot chocolate and sorted my drop bags. Then as Tim left, I went back for a couple more hours sleep.

## Leg 6 – Carmacks to McCabe (38 miles)

Full of hot chocolate, wearing clean clothes (bliss) and well-stocked with food I left Carmacks early in the morning for McCabe. The first 15 miles or so was along a fire road. The snow-covered road had some deceptively long, steep climbs and some lovely descents. The sun was out and it was a beautiful but chilly morning. I met a couple of local people out on snowmobiles, Larry the trapper



*The mighty Yukon River*

out on a 50 mile loop to check his trap lines and a young man who shook my hand and his head when he heard what I was attempting to do. The trail left the road and headed through beautiful woods up and down towards the Yukon river. I knew we would drop down onto the jumble ice of the river three times before we finally crossed to McCabe Creek on the other bank.

As it grew later I stated to prepare for night with better face protection and the headtorch. I felt in the 'technology' pocket of my bike bag but couldn't find the headtorch, I got off the bike and searched all the bags but there was still no headtorch. I must have left it at Carmacks. This was a disaster and an embarrassment.

If I was going to have to bivy I didn't want to be near the river where it would be colder. And I didn't want to bivy because I would lose 12 hours. So I kept moving as fast as I could. Halfway across the second excursion onto the river I met head snowmobile driver Gary. I told him of my problem and intention to keep going as long as I could see. Later I learned he had checked my spot tracker to see I had got safely off the river.

I kept going, walking now. The night was overcast and the trail was narrow with trees either side. There was nowhere that seemed right to bivy so I just kept going slowly and cautiously. I remembered how a friend had talked of not using his headtorch at night. If he could do it I could do it. I picked my way across the third jumble ice feeling with my feet (those lessons in the woods before Braeburn had been useful!).

The only light was the green light from my spot tracker flashing every 10 seconds or so. It didn't show up trail markers but it did briefly show Tim's tracks on the snow as it flashed. I came down onto the ice for the last time to cross to McCabe. It was really dark now and there was no obvious path. Going through the ice could literally be fatal. I put the bike down and searched for the path. The route marker was on the wrong side so I backtracked till I found the previous marker, and started again. This time there seemed to be a definite glow from behind me that showed a bit of the trail. I looked, but there was no source of light. But that glow was there every time the trail seemed impossible.

I made it across the ice to solid ground on the other river bank. I was only a mile or so from the checkpoint but there were no trees to help define the trail and many times I had to put the bike down and feel with my feet for the right way. At last I came up onto the farm itself. Where was the checkpoint? I left the bike and knocked on the door of a motorhome. The Japanese film crew pointed me in the right direction and then followed me with the blazing lights and cameras. But medic Luke welcomed me into a workshop serving as the checkpoint. It was not luxurious but it provided somewhere to dry clothes, to eat warm food and to sleep indoors. Luke was lovely and couldn't do enough to help.

I didn't ask for help since that would be against the rules, but Luke insisted I borrow his spare headtorch. God had provided once again.

With Tim, Neil and Joel already asleep here, and Marianne somewhere behind me out on the trail. I settled on the floor for a few hours rest.

## Leg 7 – McCabe to Pelly Crossing (28 miles)

I left just before dawn, again following Tim's tyre tracks. I could see when he got off and walked, and it became a game seeing if I could stay on the bike as far up the hills as he did (I couldn't but it gave me something to aim for!).



*A selfie out on the trail*

The first few miles were straight along some power lines before the trail turned off upwards yet again. Many more miles were through an area of forest fire with spiky brushwood that came through the trail as well as alongside it, as ever the ups and downs continued.

Eventually I reached a series of lakes interspersed with woods and more brushwood. The day had been very overcast and over the lakes the cloud closed in giving me an almost total

whiteout. What should have been easy riding became very hard. I had to stop every hundred yards or so to clear my mind and vision because the white became hypnotic.



Photographer Yann appeared a snowmobile and gave me the welcome news that shortly I would start downhill for Pelly Crossing. The downhill went on for miles and miles with some steep descents, lots of speedway sliding and even some walking when it looked too risky. Eventually I reached the road, and a couple of dogs chased me into Pelly Crossing.

Robert was at Pelly Crossing, and the indefatigable Luke who made hot chocolate, food, and more food and more hot chocolate. Jo had sent her headtorch so I was now well covered for night riding.

I dragged my sleeping bag into the dark gym where Tim, Joel and Neil were already sleeping and crashed out.

Several hours later I woke and since I couldn't think of a good reason not to go, I left for Pelly Farm, again following Tim's tracks.

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

This was a straightforward leg, with the promise of a bed, drop bag (clean clothes!!) and the famous Pelly Farm lasagne at the end.



*Another day, another river, more ice*

The first 12 miles were on the river. Fortunately the jumble ice was not too bad and the trail was rideable. At least it would have been if I hadn't found the narrow trail in the headtorch so mesmerising I was fighting sleep. This was getting silly – I wasn't that tired but the trail was lulling me into a trance. A serious patch of overflow woke me up, and then at last the trail meandered up off the river and onto the road. I had assumed that the road would be easier but it was a series of sweeping climbs and descents. The descents were nice but failed to compensate for the climbs.

Tim's tracks had changed; he was walking where he should be riding. Yann arrived and gave me the good news that I was only about 3 miles from the farm and the bad news that Tim had bike problems.

I passed Tim who was not having a good day and didn't want company. I continued to Pelly Farm where the owner Sue came out to meet me. I fell into her arms in tears as the realisation hit me that I had made it this far. I didn't expect to get to this point.

Sue and Dale made me wonderfully welcome. There was coffee and lasagne (as good as its reputation) and a comfortable chair in a real house. Then I was offered a proper bed and a pillow to ease my aching knees.

After a few hours sleep I was up for breakfast which was pancakes and eggs – perfect. Marianne arrived strong as ever in herself but suffering terribly with her feet. Dale had tried to fix the gears on Tim’s bike but it wasn’t holding so Tim was forced to scratch. He insisted I take his headtorch too.

I started to get ready to leave. My knees were so swollen my cycle tights wouldn’t fit so I cut the legs off above the knee. I sorted my food and drink and reloaded the bike.

Other than that there were some substantial hills, I didn’t know the route or terrain beyond this point. I knew it was harder than anything we’d been through before but quite how hard I had no idea. More people were arriving so I left. Sue gave me directions, ending with those unforgettable words “then there’s just a little climb” ....

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

### “Beyond here lie dragons”

It took me two hours to push the bike up Sue’s ‘little climb’ but it was just a taste of things to come.



*Snowy trail near Pelly Farm*

*Photo: Lucy Tanner*

The trail through the woods was softer, with fallen trees blocking the path. There were three substantial climbs with four areas of overflow. When I finally reached the top of the hills and could see over the valley to the other side the sun came out and the view was magnificent. I stopped for food and in the silence I could almost hear the heart of the Yukon throbbing beneath the ground.

Food, where was the food? I had my emergency rations, and the correct number of dehydrated meals, Complan and porridge sachets but no trail mix, no jelly worms, no treats and worst of all, no chocolate. In my rush to leave Pelly Farm I must have put my food back in the drop bag not on my bike. There was nowhere to top up supplies before Dawson so I was going to be on very short rations.

I remembered a friend’s story of a mountain marathon done on jelly babies only eaten when he started to feel faint. And I thought of all the gold rush pioneers who had tramped these routes with heavy loads – they didn’t have energy foods. This was inconvenient but not a disaster, I could do it with careful management.

I couldn't afford to waste time so I carried on with the now familiar ride/walk, zip/unzip routine. Night fell and I rode on, the headtorch lighting up the trail ahead. There were areas of unexpected overflow including one deep one where I had to fit drybags over my boots to get across. From being open over the hills, the trail now twisted and turned and became a narrow tunnel that wound its way along the river bank. Vegetation almost met over the trail, and sticks and branches grabbed my jacket and the bike as I passed. I don't like confined spaces so this was the worst part of the trail so far.

Then a hidden branch caught my wheel as I rode and I fell heavily to the left. Thank God I didn't fall a couple of feet further or I would have been on the river ice, which might not have held. I was winded and my left knee hurt but nothing seemed broken. I checked the bike and got back on immediately so I didn't lose confidence. But the trail was so treacherous in the dark I decided it was safer to walk to the checkpoint, some 6 or 7 miles away.

My boots had given me no problems before with walking, but now they started to rub the scar tissue on the back of my right heel. I stopped and put a blister plaster on immediately.

Scroggie Creek seemed a lifetime away but eventually I arrived and was warmly welcomed by YAU veteran Mark Hines who was manning the checkpoint. There was a cabin to eat and dry clothes in and a second cabin to sleep in. I ate the stew and drank the coffee and hot chocolate provided, carefully saving my bread and cake for the next leg. I unloaded the sleeping bag for a few hours rest on the wooden bench in the cabin.



Mark (right) and the volunteers at Scroggie

Mark declared my hands and feet frostbite free, I put more plasters on my heel and took some painkillers for the knee.

I knew the next section had the steepest climb so asked Mark whether it was better to rest before or after it. He looked at me oddly and said either was fine, but once I started up I wouldn't be able to stop. A hill you can't stop on??

I was ready to go since the shorter the time out on the trail the less food I would need.

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

From Scroggie Creek it was down on the river again for a few miles, mostly rideable, then up through forests and disused mining areas heading for the infamous Black Hills. Riding through the mining areas was like riding through a weird, white moonscape. Diggers, machinery, trucks, cabins all lay abandoned a few feet from the trail, covered in snow and unreachable. Dusk fell as I rode through, and as I shined my headtorch into one large abandoned building with its doors wide open it looked as if there was a strange party going on inside. It was the only time I looked behind me on the trail.

I had walked carefully through several areas of overflow already, but these got more extensive as the trail started to climb. It was dark and overcast so all I could see was a few feet of trail ahead.

There was much worse to come. The trail was narrow and steep with snowdrifts of unknown depth on each side. Sometimes just ten painful steps before I had to pause, heart racing; sometimes as many as fifty. It went on and on, ever upwards. Mark was right, there was nowhere to stop or get off the trail. I could only pause to get my breath, holding the weight of the bike. Mind in neutral, just keep pushing; every step is one you don't have to do again.

It took four hours to push the bike up that hill through the night. After a couple of hours I noticed a strange column of cloud ahead between the trees. It danced and moved, formed and reformed but remained there ahead of me. Then it grew into a beautiful, haunting display of the Northern Lights. For me it was a sign from God that however hard the current circumstances, He was leading me on.

When the trail finally flattened out I thought I could rest but a cheeky little breeze had me reaching for another hat. The top of the hill was an exposed dome and that little breeze had already started to cover the trail with blown snow. It was a shock how fast the trail was disappearing. I hurried across the dome and down towards the protection of the trees, although it was several miles before I felt I could safely stop.



*Overflow at dawn on the mining road to Indian River*

The descent continued, opening out onto an old mining road as dawn broke. It was the perfect road for riding but my brake cable had stretched and I had no reliable braking capability. This would have to be another walk.

The mining area was vast and fascinating with trucks, buildings and machines all abandoned where they stood until they were released by

the thaw. It was so fascinating that I even forgot to stop and eat my dehydrated meal.

Then I saw a handwritten sign, 'Indian River checkpoint 1 km'. A sea of overflow to negotiate, another short hill and I reached the wall tents. Gerard came out to meet me "I wasn't expecting a woman on a bike" he said. Actually, neither was I.

Gerard was the perfect host, cooking spicy noodle soup and providing hot chocolate and coffee. I had a lovely cuddle with his dog Celtic then retired into the tent to sleep.



When I woke Diane the medic was there. She had arrived by snowmobile with a message that my daughter had received an offer for medical school. It was amazing that the message reached me in the middle of the Yukon wilderness. I was thrilled, and also delighted to see Diane. Some female company was most welcome and she was able to cast a professional eye over my heel. German skier Mathieu also arrived; he was travelling faster than I was but stopping for longer.

After some ham and cheese provided by Gerard (I was lucky, the ham was later stolen and eaten by Celtic) I got ready to leave. I had said nothing to anyone about my food shortage because that would be asking for help and against the rules but as I was packing up, the snowmobile driver who was escorting the Japanese camera team, brought out bread and butter that Mathieu and I wolfed down. Then, completely unasked, he organised zip bags of sausage, trail mix and homemade cookies ready for us to take out on the trail. God had provided headtorches and crampons, and now He provided food.

Mathieu was getting ready to sleep so I left, yet again filmed by the Japanese camera team. I couldn't imagine what they would do with all that footage of my legs going round, or me pushing the bike uphill. They must have hours of it by now!

## **Leg 11 – Indian River to Dawson (49 miles)**

The trail followed the mining road for several more miles before it headed off onto narrower tracks. It was mostly rideable unless the climbs were steep, but the snow was getting deeper. I knew I had King Solomon's Dome to cross and wanted to do so at night when the trail would be firmer. And I wanted to ride into Dawson in the daylight. I ploughed on, sometimes imagining I was on a walk or ride in England rather than in the snow of the Yukon. I had changed the dressing on my heel and clamped it firmly into my boot but although riding was fine, each step with my right foot was very painful.

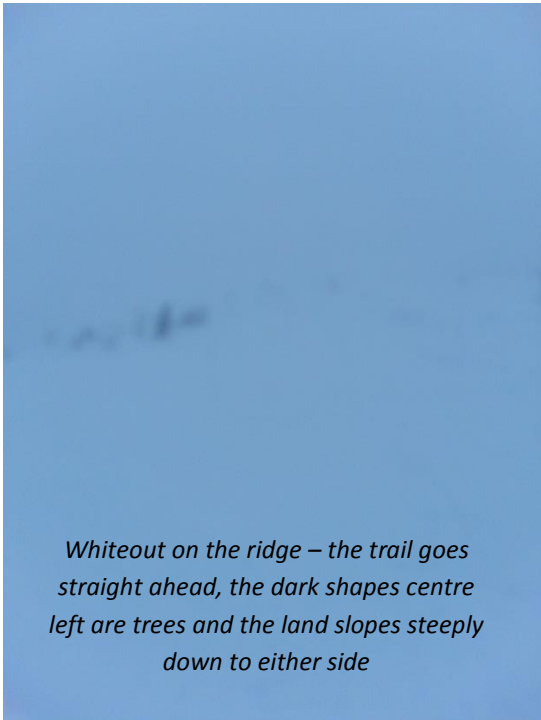
As the snow got deeper and the trail started climbing the Japanese camera team arrived by snowmobile. Did they want more footage of my feet? They took some film then zoomed on ahead but the snowmobile was churning up the trail so it was harder to ride. When I caught up with them the real climb up King Solomon's Dome began. The snow was soft and it was so difficult to push

through; I wondered if I had the physical strength to get the bike to the top. I asked how far it was – “4 or 5 miles”. I remembered the verse from the Bible “strength will rise when you wait upon the Lord” and waited, then pushed. Slowly I was making progress, painful but still progress. But I had had enough of having a camera thrust in my face filming every grimace and asked them to leave me alone which thankfully they did.

It started to snow with sticky flakes that settled and made the climb even harder. But just when I thought it would never end the trail flattened out. It was barely rideable now but at least I was at the top. I ate the last homemade cookie to celebrate.

The trail seemed to loop round on itself for hours on top of the dome. Conditions were getting worse and I just wanted to get off there. The trail became a road – Upper Bonanza – a name I knew

from all my reading on the gold rush. It was climbing, of course, but was still a road. Then it opened out onto snowfields as the trail crossed a ridge on the top of the mountains. It was dawn by now, and I felt I was trying to push the bike across what should be a ski resort. The trail was almost invisible beneath the new and blown snow, and either the bike or I sank into the soft surface with every step. Then the clouds came over and I was in a whiteout. There were two choices, either bivy and wait for Mathieu to come through and break trail since he would be faster on skis, or just move slowly step by step, feeling my way.



*Whiteout on the ridge – the trail goes straight ahead, the dark shapes centre left are trees and the land slopes steeply down to either side*

I knew from the map the trail led downhill soon so I continued as the trail wound down the lee side of the mountain. Trail became road again and I realised I had reached the 15 mile downhill Diane had told me about. The downhill was fun but hard work since the back wheel had a tendency to slide out. I was grateful my

brake cable had been fixed at Indian River.

Part way down I met snowmobile drivers Gary and Josh who stopped for a chat. They made me realise that I had almost made it, but I wasn't sure I was ready for the adventure to end.

The downhill became a wider mining road with a few more uphill too. Glenn and Spencer, Jo and Lucy came out to hug me then sped off. The road continued, and I passed landmarks I'd read of in books, places I'd heard of but never thought to see. I talked to a local musher out exercising his dogs and tried to imagine how this area must have looked in the late 1890's. There was no hurry now so I took my time.



*On the mining road heading for Dawson*

*Photo: ©yannbb.com*

Then the Japanese camera crew arrived and the trail veered off along the Yukon River. Not far now but a real sting in the tail. The road crossed a bridge, but the trail went down a steep bank, and across the frozen river, I followed it, cameraman in tow filming madly. The other bank was a near vertical slope, very narrow and very steep and I really couldn't see how I could do it. I told the cameraman he might have to help if I got stuck. I started up, kicking footholds and physically lifting the bike up inch by inch. I looked up and saw the cameraman had scrambled ahead and was filming my struggle from above. If I fell with that heavy bike he was simply going to film it all.

I regret to say I lost my temper and told him I had had enough. I did apologise afterwards, as did the camera crew, but it was a dark moment.

But I had made it up the last slope and was now riding towards the finish. Dawson was fascinating and I stopped to speak to more local people on the way.

Then the path dropped down off the river bank and onto the road. I could see the FINISH banner and people cheering and waving. After 10 days and 5 hours, and by the grace of God, I crossed the finish line. The sixth finisher in the 2015 race, first woman to ever finish on a bike, and first European woman ever to finish.



*The finish*

*Photo: Jo Davies*

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

- Andy Heading – arctic racing expert and superb sports photographer
- Al Sheldon – holder of the bike record for the YAU
- Mark Hines – arctic racing expert
- Icycle in Whitehorse who winterised the fatbike and advised on tyres and setup
- Mark Redwood at TFN Nottingham who serviced the fatbike
- Tim Lewington at Speedhub who fitted the fatbike and managed to find me a comfortable saddle
- JP at APTA Bootcamp, Castle Donington who ensured I had the necessary upper body strength

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

Without God I would not have got to the start let alone the finish of this race. His constant presence meant I never felt alone or afraid however difficult the circumstances. And my grateful thanks go to all those who prayed for me – your prayers kept me warm.

To God be the glory.