

# Local pedal boat conquers English Channel

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If Paul Tucker makes it into the Guinness Book of Records, a Norton Shores manufacturer will be right in there with him.

Tucker, a 59-year-old former British Army Officer, crossed the English Channel twice May 21 in a pedal-powered boat made by Nauticraft Corp. in a plant at 5980 Grand Haven Road.

Chomping on Mars bars and pedaling like mad, Tucker completed the nearly 60-mile round-trip channel crossing from Folkestone Harbour, England, to Calais, France, and back again in a record time of 14 hours and 20 minutes.

This wasn't quite the use the company had in mind when it began manufacturing its 12-foot "Escapade" pedal boat here in 1995, company president Curt Chambers said this morning.

"I'm absolutely dumbfounded that they just put this boat in the water and, without any modifications, did this," Chambers said. "I would have said the odds of them making it were one out of 10."

Earlier attempts to cross the Channel — a notoriously choppy and stormy body of water — with a "pedalo," as the British call them, were unsuccessful.

But not with the Muskegon boat. "The craft was magnificent and ran really well," Tucker said afterward. "It wasn't too bad at all."

The boat was designed by a Rhode Island yacht designer named Garry Hoyt for seagoing conditions and, as last week's events proved, is "definitely seaworthy," Chambers said.

Except for some minor improvements in the drive and steering mechanisms, it is essentially the same product Nauticraft began turning out eight years ago.

Tucker obtained his boat from John Richardson of Waterbikes Inc., the United Kingdom distributor of Nauticraft products.

He was trying to raise \$20,000 for the British Royal Legion, an association of former military personnel similar to the American Legion. Richardson was just trying to boost sales.

Chambers' company has made about 150 of the "Escapade" boats and has since added two other models, the "Encore" and the "Sprite" to its product line. They are sold through dealers in Florida and Washington, as well as in England, France and Sweden. Mail orders are also accepted.

The all-plastic Escapade is designed to be unsinkable and self-righting. The boat weighs 325 pounds and can carry three people and cargo up to a weight of 525 pounds. Its drive consists of toothed belt and a 16-inch propeller, and can cruise at around 4 knots.

An Escapade boat like the one used by Tucker could be purchased at the factory here for \$2,475, or \$3,050 with trailer and cover.

A competing team, using an English-made boat, has been trying to accomplish the same thing for 10 years, Chambers noted.

Its last attempt took place four days earlier. It ended when Scott Bonna, 36, had to be plucked from the water after stormy seas flipped his pedal boat.

But according to Chambers, Tucker's "Escapade" rode through the choppy channel very well, even better than the escort boat did.

"It just rode with the waves," Chambers said. "The guy pedaling yelled over and said 'I'm really glad I'm in this boat.'"

Tucker had spent 36 years in the Royal Artillery and kept fit by visiting a local gym during his lunch break.

Chambers now says he hopes to be able to capitalize on Tucker's accomplishment to promote his product's seaworthiness.

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