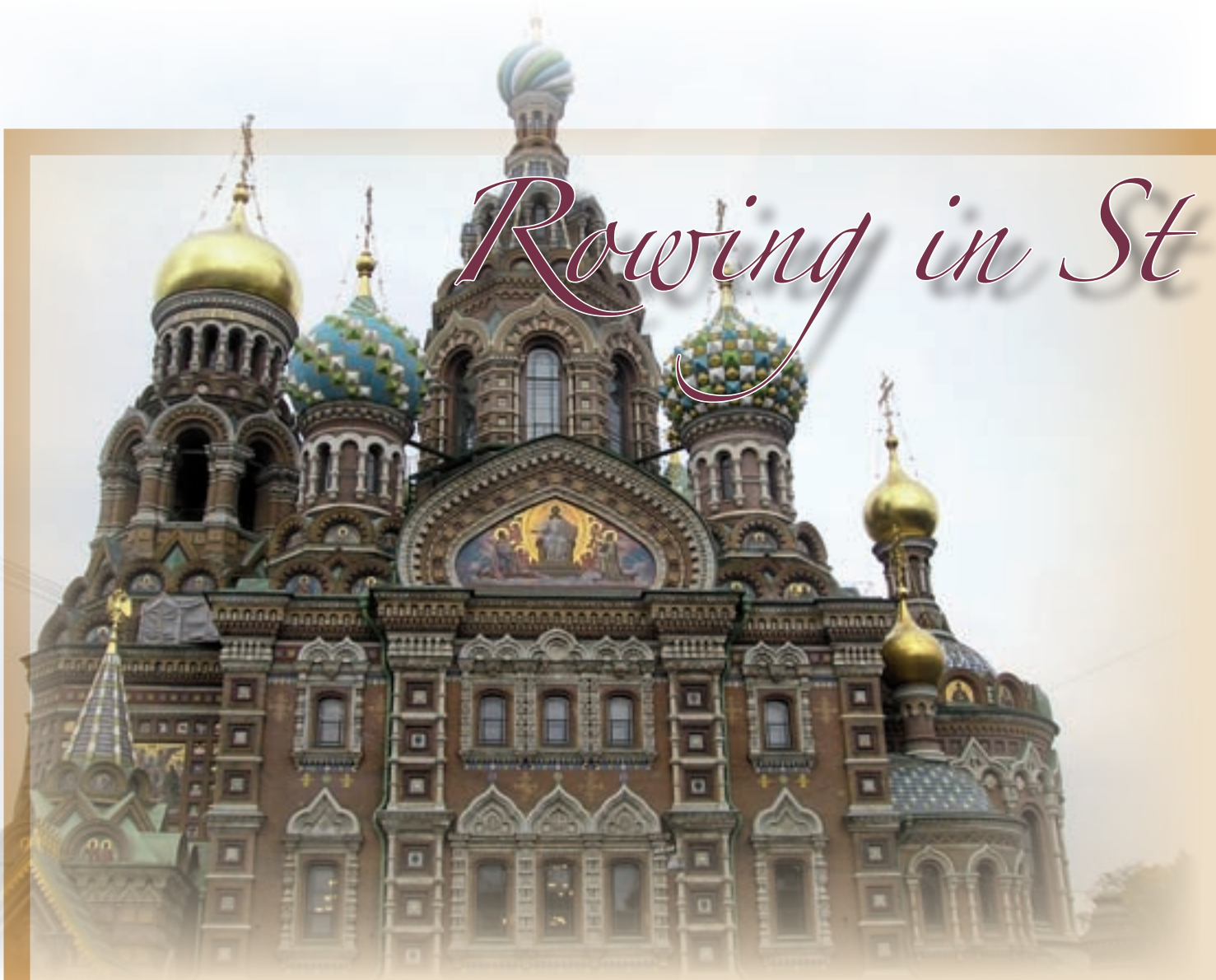


Rowing in St



Road Trip

The six brave souls tasked with the delivery of our equipment to Saint Petersburg assembled at RAF Henlow on Saturday 24 September. A late crossing on Le Shuttle was followed by a drive through the night to arrive in Berlin on Sunday afternoon. The very efficient public transportation system allowed the group to spend an evening in the German capital, recharging batteries ready for the assault on the Polish road network.

An early morning start on Monday took us across the border into Poland, our objective being to reach Vilnius for a night stop. After a breakfast of fried mystery meat, boiled potatoes and red cabbage we discovered that autobahn speeds were not possible on the Polish roads, which have literally been pounded into two sets of grooves by heavy trucks. It became clear that we would struggle to get to Lithuania, let alone Vilnius, so the decision was taken to drive until 8 pm and then seek accommodation in the nearest town, Augustow.

Leaving Poland the following morning we soon arrived at the Latvian border and were very unpleasantly surprised by the extent of road works carried out under EU funding. A 100km stretch of A-Road, divided into single-track chunks, controlled by temporary traffic lights - what a nightmare! The end of another long day brought us into Tallinn, the Estonian capital, for a good nights rest ready for the Russian border.

Leaving the EU and entering the Russian Federation in a UK registered minibus, towing a boat trailer, is not a process to be undertaken lightly - there were plenty of delicate negotiations to get the vehicle, people and equipment into Russia. Three hours waiting to get to the border, followed by two hours to get



through the paperwork, made for a very stressed Russian-speaker as we finally pulled away from the border. Another 150km of bouncy roads through speed traps and traffic police check-points got us to Saint Petersburg some six hours after the anticipated arrival time - time for a beer!

Including the return journey, which was completed quicker and without the added border stress, we travelled an amazing 6000km over seven and a half days in a minibus with a trailer. Was it worth it? To row around the islands in Saint Petersburg - you bet!

Sgt Chris Morrill
RAF Innsworth

Petersburg - Russia

The Girls Crew-eye View

We were ready to race the Russians - eagerly awaiting the Rowing Tour to St Petersburg, where we would be competing in the Energiya Marathon, a 20k race on the icy waters of the Neva. As we all know, Russian women are big and scary so the sole women's RAF crew (Vicky 'Muscles' Melham in the stroke seat, Clair 'She-Ra' Shaw at 3, Gill 'Burley' Burgess at 2, Helen 'Hercules' Wannell at Bow and Angie 'Bloody-quick' Backhouse our cox) were pumped for a tough race.

With our final training session behind us we jumped onto the plane to St Petersburg, only to find, upon arrival, that the women's race was in fact now only 10k, not the 20k that the men's crews would be rowing, so our 50k race training was not going to be of much use. Now, with the relatively short distance of 10k to row, we would have to change our race strategy - our new race plan was to blast off, go hard and keep going until we finished.

Training

The Russians put us through a tortuous initiation ceremony before they allowed us to race on their river (this is actually what it felt like, in fact it was just a training session). Having pushed off and paddled out from the club we immediately had to negotiate a very tight bridge arch on an equally tight bend. Having got through in one piece we found ourselves on a stretch of river equivalent in width and chopiness to the Thames at the Houses of Parliament. The next test was to row through an F1 Powerboat circuit - whilst a race was in progress!! Having powerboats zoom past you, at many, many miles per hour just a blade's length away was quite an experience and we quickly came to the conclusion that H&S for watersports had not been implemented in Russia yet. We were now familiar with the course and ready for the race on Sunday.

Raceday - Sunday 3 Oct. For the last time we all embarked on the short walk to the Rowing Club, a once majestic but now, sadly,



rather dilapidated 1960's building in the style of a ship, in the suburbs of St Petersburg. We checked the boats, adorned our race kit and were ready to race! We boated, then floated around the start area for a while - it was only at this point that we realised we'd forgotten to ask Chris (the only Russian speaker on the trip) what 'Attention... Go!' was in Russian. Somehow we managed to get through the start line at the right time(ish), and then came the dreaded bridge/bend combination. We got through it well before really putting the power on and by the second lap we had settled into the race, but were very pleased once it had finished.

The rest of the afternoon had a rather surreal feel to it (something to do with the amount of vodka consumed perhaps?). It started with the team being told that they had been summoned to the podium, why - had we won something? After a substantial amount of time wandering around trying to work out what we should do we were pushed towards the stadium. We had actually missed the presentation for the Women's Senior Division (in which we had got Bronze!), but they insisted on us hijacking someone else's medal ceremony. So, with much pomp and ceremony, we were presented with our Bronze medals and certificates in a rather elaborate Olympic-style medal presentation.

The 'Svetlanas' who had been hosting us put on a great picnic afterwards - consisting mainly of pork fat and vodka! Our hosts had also arranged a party boat trip through the rivers and canals of St Petersburg where we saw all the sights - the magnificent Winter Palace, the Peter and Paul Fortress and the Church of the Spilt Blood. The labyrinth of canals was immense and if we had known this beforehand we may not have been so keen to take part in the 'St Petersburg tradition' of kissing someone every time you went under a bridge. Needless to say, there were lots of bridges and I think this was just a ploy for the Russian women to get hold of the brave men of the Royal Air Force. But what a fabulous party - a great finale to a great trip.

Fg Off Vicky Melham
RAF Brize Norton

