

Trip of discovery to say goodbye to a friend

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Eganville -- "We're dead."

Those were the words heard by a canoeist from his friend as their canoe capsized and they were catapulted into the freezing cold water of the Yukon. Struggling to stay afloat and swimming against a strong current to get to shore, they had no idea if they were going to make it home alive.

Aaron Hitchins and Will O'Brien, both natives of Eganville who now live in Canmore and Whitehorse, respectively, embarked on the journey of a lifetime in a remote part of the Yukon to fulfill a promise to say goodbye to a friend doing what they loved most.

They embarked on a two-week canoe and hunting trip that tested their courage and resolve in order to lay to rest the ashes of their good friend, Andrew Brose, who died in a tragic car accident in 2015. The trio all attended Opeongo High School and left the Ottawa Valley to pursue their dream, but their hearts always remained in Renfrew County.

Mr. Brose went to Toronto to pursue a successful filmmaking career until his life was cut short at the age of 30 in a car crash while returning to Toronto after spending Easter with his parents, James and Kim Brose, at their Lake Dore

with the moose was their sheer size. I have hunted moose in Ontario and they are nowhere the size of the ones we saw. It was very intimidating."

Despite their initial trepidation, both Mr. Hitchins and Mr. O'Brien each successfully took down a moose. In the film depicting their trip, both men had very intense reactions to their successful hunt. It is a powerful testament to the emotion of their journey.

"After a while we would forget we were being filmed and our emotions are raw and exposed," Mr. Hitchins said. "That was only the first part. One of the biggest challenges was transporting the moose meat back out of the wilderness. The weight was enormous and at times dangerous. We were always on the lookout for grizzly bears and the intense waves of the river were always dangerous."

That danger came to light when their canoe capsized with all their equipment and meat and both men struggled with all their strength to make it to shore and recover their belongings.

"At first we were oblivious to the freezing water," he said. "We were more concerned with pulling the canoe to shore. It seemed like an eternity because the water was so strong, but we finally did it."



Starting out on a 12-day journey into the Yukon wilderness. Former Eganville residents Aaron Hitchins and Will O'Brien head out with their gear and the ashes of their friend, Andrew Brose. The two men would battle the elements to say their final goodbye to Andrew.



Mr. Hitchins and Mr. O'Brien look over one of the two moose they hunted on their trip to the Yukon. Mr. Hitchins said although he has hunted moose in Ontario, they pale in comparison to the size of the ones they encountered on their trip.

farm. Mr. Hitchins started a film/photo company in Canmore and Mr. O'Brien travelled to Whitehorse where he is a ski instructor and whitewater paddling guide.

They all grew up whitewater paddling and hunting, and when the two men learned of Mr. Brose's tragic death, they vowed to fulfill a dream to go moose hunting in the vast expanse of Canada's north and take Andrew's ashes along on their journey of hope and discovery.

As part of that dream, Mr. Hitchins convinced *Outdoor Life*, the leading hunting magazine in North America, to chronicle their journey both in print and film.

"This was an absolutely revolutionary concept for *Outdoor Life*," Mr. Hitchins explained in an interview with the *Leader*. "We wanted to make a film about our canoe and hunting experiences. Together with the magazine, we were able to fund the film with a number of sponsors. The film is not only a chronicle of our adventure, but it is a testament to our resolve to test our limits."

And test their limits they did. As their plane took them to the remote McNeil River, they immediately noticed there were no roads through the endless forests to their destination. If there were any sudden injuries or mishaps, they were literally on their own.

However, they were determined to complete their quest to hunt moose and say goodbye to their friend.

"We never really thought about the trip as being dangerous, but it was in the back of our minds," Mr. Hitchins said. "What struck me the most about our encounters

"Sitting there, catching our breath, we knew we were defeated. The river had given us ducks, geese, grayling, and a few Yetis of moose meat, but now it was time for us to yield. Slinging dry bags over our shoulders, we portaged the rest of the rapid."

The film captures the near-death ordeal of the men as the camera, tied down inside the canoe, filmed the entire episode. As well, a drone filmed their struggle from an incredible angle. At one point, the drone crashed into the river, but they also recovered it undamaged.

The final leg of their journey ends with one of the most emotional and powerful sendoffs of their friend's ashes that has ever been captured on film. As they said goodbye to Andrew, they realized just how far they had come in their own personal journeys.

"It was the experience of a lifetime and one we will never forget," Mr. Hitchins said. "Saying goodbye to Andrew closed a chapter of our life, but it really opened up another one. We did something that others only dream about. We followed our dream and we will never look back."

The entire filming lasted 12 days and the film's post-production was completed in May. Filming and photography was done by Matt White of Rockhouse Motion, owned by Mr. Hitchins. The online article and film is available at the magazine's site that has over 1 million subscribers.

For Mr. Hitchins, he is thrilled the film and article have been well-received and that *Outdoor Life* is looking at future projects using the model he developed.

As for the moose meat he and Mr. O'Brien hauled back to civilization, Mr. Hitchins says none of it was wasted.

"Last Christmas, we just could not get back home for the holidays, so we shared our food with a large group of friends in Canmore who also did not get home," he said. "Many of them were foreigners or fellow Canadians and together we shared the meal. Close to 100 people have shared our moose meat and that is a wonderful feeling."

Their short film, *Beyond The Roar*, will be screened this Sunday evening at the historic O'Brien Theatre in Renfrew. The film begins at 9:45 p.m. Friends and family are invited as are members of the general public. Both men will be there to answer questions about their experience.

There will be no admission charge, but donations will be accepted for a special fund to be announced.



Andrew Brose



Making their way across one of the rivers in the Yukon, the two men hauled hundreds of pounds of equipment, moose meat and antlers as they made their way through miles of wilderness.



Although Mr. O'Brien is a professional whitewater paddle guide in Whitehorse, he and Mr. Hitchins were constantly challenged by raging waves on their journey. At one point, their canoe capsized and both men came close to death when they were catapulted into a freezing river.



Making their way through the Yukon. Mr. Hitchins and Mr. O'Brien were filmed during their canoe and hunting trip to the Yukon. The film, *Beyond The Roar*, and an article are featured in *Outdoor Life*. A special screening of the film takes place this Sunday at the O'Brien Theatre in Renfrew.