



“You have a big paunch,” people joke. “But so did Albertondo, Hoffman and Streeter, who loves the English Channel – at the beginning. Long-distance swimming is not the World Cup, where swimmers conquer short distances by swimming very fast. A couple of weeks ago I weighed 234 pounds, then lost 13 pounds during training and I’m planning on gaining more weight before the July 4th start. During the first week of swimming I expect to lose two pounds a day and a little less from then on. When my challenge is over I think I’ll be some 44 pounds lighter.”

## AMERICA



Last year, Martin went cross-country skiing a hundred times, he conquered the slopes a hundred times, did a hundred swings on the rings, parallel bars and the horizontal bar and he plunged into the water some 400 times. In April, he walked alongside Gabriela Szabo and Said-Guerni in the French Pyrenees. His brain had to be available for inspection at all times and he was the one doing all the inspecting. The Mississippi has refused to be conquered for a century. Wayne Thompson decided not to continue at 1825.7 miles, which is before the snakes and alligators begin to appear. Martin doesn’t yet know whether he’ll wear a swimming mask and gloves. The three kayakers accompanying him made it down the river in 101 days, 97 days and 74 days, respectively. He wants to cover the same distance by swimming in 66 days. He’ll have to battle with six different species of poisonous snakes and go face to face with alligators. You can call it madness or call it suicide.

“I won’t overcome the Mississippi for money, but because I truly believe I can do it. Five years ago I couldn’t have tackled it, in a year I wouldn’t want to. It has to be now,” says Strel. “As far as politics are concerned, I think that it’ll also be a compliment to the 10-year anniversary of the Unites States’ recognition of Slovenia as an independent country.” The frontiers are in a person’s mind; the frontiers of endurance, of fear and courage as well as the borders of different



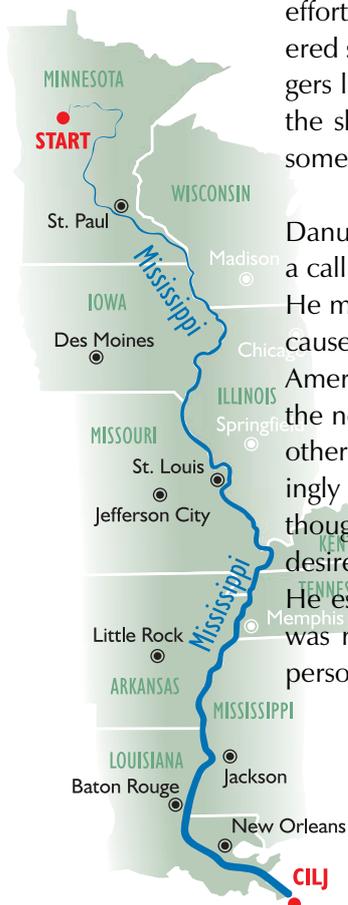
## Thursday, July 4 – Day One

This is where Domen Mal's narrative ends and Martin Strel is brought right down to the source of the Mississippi, an awe-inspiring North American river, which no one has conquered in the history of mankind. Where does Strel draw the courage to face the impossible? Will he manage to defeat the frontier which just recently seemed insurmountable?

July 4<sup>th</sup>, 2002, was a beautifully sunny day, Independence Day in the USA and also the day when Martin Strel first touched the waters of the Mississippi, escorted by his team, the press and scores of cameras. It was exactly 11 a.m. local time. Martin waved his last good-bye to a little throng gathered in the wilderness surrounding the source of the Mississippi in Northern Minnesota. Before making the first stroke with his mighty right arm, he took one quick glance at the sky. It was a symbolic act – a glance up in the universe at the start of a feat which will resound throughout the galaxy. At this moment, more than ever before, his faith in God was unyielding. He knew that he needed to count on His help.

To the spectators on the bank it seemed as if Martin was starting the greatest accomplishment of his life strangely composed and at peace. At that very moment strange images were passing in front of his eyes, images that had no head or tail. There was the number 2360, the number of miles separating him from a sign in the middle of the river that reads 0, where the Mississippi ends its course next to the Head of Passes in the Gulf of Mexico. He was scheduled to reach this point on September 7, which was a long time from then. He was facing 66, perhaps 65 or maybe even 70 days of uncertainty and super-human efforts. He couldn't anticipate all the challenges of the Mississippi's undiscovered secrets that were in store for him during this period. Were the biggest dangers lurking around the corner really the waves, the rapids and the whirlpools, the ships, sharks, alligators and poisonous snakes, or was the greatest danger something that no one had anticipated?

The scene of him victoriously raising his hands after the 1867 miles of the Danube was running through his head. The very same day he'd already received a call from the USA with an unbelievable proposition – to swim the Mississippi. He met with the Americans in Ljubljana that week, but made no promises, because he wanted to see the river first. In six months he resumed his talks with the Americans in Vienna and it was there that an American radio station broadcast the news about the planned challenge. Both parties had to establish where the other one stood. Martin found the thought and the wish to conquer the seemingly impossible increasingly alluring; he could hardly resist them anymore. Even though he had hundreds of doubts keeping him in check, there was this bursting desire to do something that no one else had done before outweighing them all. He established for a fact that a new challenge, like swimming the Mississippi, was right up his alley. After all, Martin Strel is a true Hercules of Dolenjska, personifying the strength and the will of the people from that region in Southern





At the start ...

Slovenia, who used to be dependent on the soil. It was this mighty strength that won the battles for survival from generation to generation in this hilly and barren land over the centuries. Even before World War II the Slovene writer Pre•ihov Voranc described in his travelogue sketches entitled *From Mokronog to Pijana gora* the grotesque social conditions in these parts of the world and the resilience of the people living there. Even Martin Strel experienced the remnants of such a harsh life. The one realization that stayed with him from his youth was to be strong if you want to survive. Only the strongest and fittest count. This is what shaped Martin, who in August 2001 was already on his way across the Atlantic Ocean. The aim of his trip was to see the Mississippi. He scrupulously studied the first 500 miles or so; the stretch from the source to Minneapolis. He was taken in by the intact wilderness, the home of bears, wolves, deer and other wildlife. The land of the Chippewa Indians, where some 30,000 still live, captivated him completely.

The beginning was luckier than he had imagined. Due to the intense heat at that time (on certain days the temperatures soared to over 104° F) the water was much warmer than he had hoped for. The temperature of the Mississippi, the source of which is Lake Itasca, reached as much as 84.2° F in some parts. Because the rainfall in the previous ten days had been abundant, the water level was much higher than it usually was and this made the swimming a lot easier; at



least he was spared the crawling among the rocks that he'd been counting on. It was very lucky especially because the Mississippi is a treacherous river in this part with the changing currents swirling among giant boulders. A team of three American kayakers: Matthew Mohlke, Byron Curtis and David Hale, was able to accompany him by actually paddling in their kayaks and not by having to haul them around on their backs. Out of all the candidates in the USA who were prepared to work with him in this great adventure, Martin chose these three himself, according to his standards. This is how he explained his decision, "I look a person in the eyes. After a few sentences I'm able to say just who I'm dealing with. I've never been wrong so far."

## MINNESOTA



The first day Martin was able to swim up a storm. This is what a Sports Illustrated journalist had to say about it, "Strel started by swimming so quickly that the three kayakers accompanying him had trouble keeping up. The kayakers would whistle to warn Strel of the upcoming dangers, but nevertheless he often got hurt. He could feel the flow of the current, which helped him a great deal. Soon afterwards came the first cramps in the legs, only mild at first. He learned from his previous adventures that they were nothing unusual at the start and otherwise felt good. After only eight hours of swimming and one lunch break he managed to cover 26 miles and so the day ended well. The accompanying team got five witnesses to confirm with their signatures that they saw Martin dive into the Mississippi and then climb out on the bank for the Guinness Book of Records. Five different signatures would be collected each day for the rest of the journey."

The first day of his greatest feat yet presented no real surprise for Martin; he only got to experience a small part of the exhaustion and the challenges still to come. The news about the beginning of his incredible journey spread all over the world lightning-fast and immediately provoked a lot of interest among the American public. Despite all the hype, Martin remained with his feet firmly on the ground, his psyche focused in a way that most of us couldn't comprehend. He had some additional reasons which led him to believe that his goal was attainable from the point of view of sport achievements. This is what he said about it, "When I returned from the USA I put all of my thoughts into this project. I realized that swimming the Mississippi would be an incredible achievement. It would be the longest swim in the history of mankind, a record to surpass all others. I was scheduled to reach my destination on the 10-year anniversary of the United States' recognition of Slovenia as an independent country and the anniversary of the apocalyptic September 11, which happened just two days after my return from the USA. I wanted to determine whether this would be an American-Slovene project or vice versa, so I went to see Jelko Kacin. After that I was on my way to the USA again, but this time things were already serious. I



## Thursday, July 18 – Day Fifteen

Martin left St. Cloud and headed towards Monticello, Minnesota. His thoughts were still centered on the encounter with the whirlpool, which took place two days before; the first serious challenge of his journey. He knew that some of the whirlpools generated in the Mississippi were strong enough to suck in smaller boats, let alone a swimmer. However, he concluded that his many previous experiences with rivers and the physical fitness which he had been building up for over a year would help him overcome that barrier.

Despite the many locks which took a lot of steam out of him, Strel managed to cover 42 miles on this day, which was more than the team had planned in the morning. That was one of the reasons why there was a big smile on Martin's face when he reached Elk River; the other was the good turn that the weather was taking.

There was a big crowd waiting to greet him in Elk River. They couldn't hide their excitement or respect for Martin's tremendous courage. Will Steger, the American who conquered the North and South Poles, had dinner with Strel that night; it was truly the Champions' Night, as one reporter put it.

*The three greats:  
Will, Martin, and Yul*





## Tuesday, August 6 – Day Thirty-four

Martin left Quincy, Missouri, by practically rolling into the water – there wasn't anything else to be done in the heavily silted bank of the river. Despite crossing two locks and the constant pain in his arms, he managed to finish the day according to plan, covering 31 miles in a little over 11 hours. He made a short stop in Hannibal, Missouri, the town of Mark Twain, who left a lasting mark on children's literature with *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Our team put up an inflatable arch next to the memorial ship of Mark Twain.

Soon, there was a big gathering of distinguished citizens of Hannibal, including Woodrow W. Burt, the principal of LaGrange College, which is where the party later spent the night. Martin was greeted by a boy dressed as Tom Sawyer and he got a laugh by announcing, "I'm Huckleberry Finn!" Hannibal is a sleepy town, and one which the rest of the world wouldn't be aware existed if it wasn't for Mark Twain. Some 18,000 inhabitants live mainly off the writer's fame and glory. The Mark Twain Museum is dedicated only to him and his work, with the spotlight on the original drawings by Norman Rockwell, who portrayed all of the characters from Twain's books in his typical, waggish style. At the foot of Cardiff Hill is the Tom and Huck Statue, dating from 1926. It shows the two embracing each other and heading for their astonishing adventures.

Lars Anderson of Sports Illustrated had the following to say about Martin's condition, "He is in good spirits partly because, for the past two weeks, numerous Slovenes have stood on the banks and cheered; some have even jumped in and swam a little ways with him. Like Forrest Gump as he ran across the country, Strel attracts people who simply want to join him."

This is how Jelko Kacin described his experience of Mark Twain's world, "Any longer and continuous stay in the USA always opens up new horizons for the European visitors. Traveling down the Mississippi alongside Martin Strel reveals new shores of this infinite river every day. There are always different places and special people, simple and open. The river has many unusual stories to tell and there are also many questions and comparisons which spring to mind. The Mississippi runs through ten states starting from Minnesota all the way to Louisiana. The states differ greatly according to the level of development and the national and cultural origin of its inhabitants. The racial structure and mentality of the south is different from the racial structure and mentality in the north. The humid climate in the south presents a further demarcation line. Some places are literally forgotten, both by the state and by God, as well as being undeveloped and backward. Only after experiencing life in such places can Mark Twain be read with enough thought and insight and Tom Sawyer's world, defined by this great river, can truly be understood."



## Monday, August 12 – Day Forty

### POPEYE

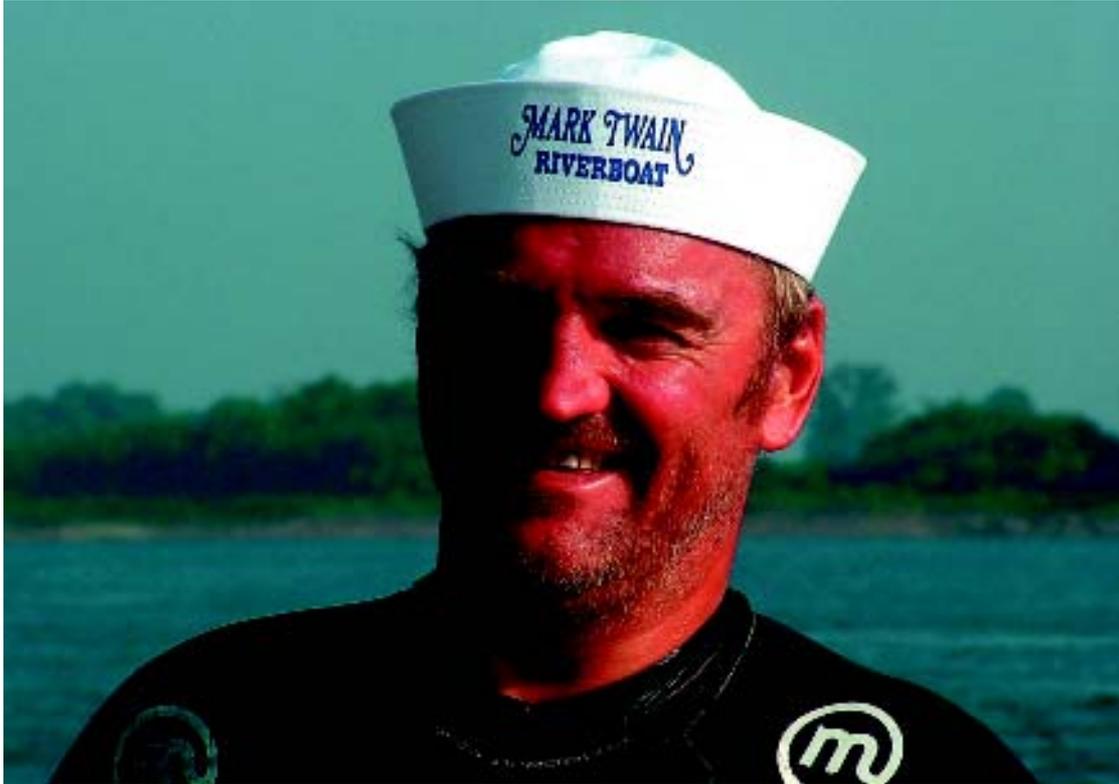
This was the day of a new record. Martin made good use of the stronger current and covered an incredible distance of 43 miles, which is truly mind-boggling. Nevertheless, he was still lagging behind by a day, although determined to make it up in the lower part of the river. He was still convinced that he was going to reach the finish in the Gulf of Mexico on September 7, according to the original plan.

Here's what Jelko Kacin wrote on this day, "Martin's feat is evoking respect from all sides and also calling out for comparisons. In Slovenia he could be compared to Peter Klepec or Martin Krpan, both known as local Hercules. In Sports Illustrated he's been compared to Twain's Tom Sawyer, but I find the comparison with the brave sailor Popeye much more suitable. Popeye is another well-known character from the Mississippi and also the hero of comic strips and cartoons.

Having left St. Genevive, Missouri, on the right bank of the river in the morning, Martin reached Chester, Illinois exactly at noon. Chester was established 250 years ago by French settlers, who were making their way into the territory upstream. In Slovenia, Chester wouldn't be considered a town, or even a village. But such little posts used to play a very important role on the trade-routes, which gave them the status of a town. In Chester, Martin was greeted by several reporters representing the local paper, the local radio station, Channel 3 and CBS. Unfortunately it started pouring when he reached the shore, but there were still some enthusiastic and curious admirers gathered on the bank, who greeted him as their new Popeye.

Among those standing on the bank was the owner of the Popeye Museum. Popeye was created in this very town at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Elzie Crisler Segar, who first worked as a part time worker and actor in a local theatre and later became a projectionist at the movie house. After the movie house had gone to ruin, he began making comic strips. He was inspired by the local people who lived in Chester at the time; Popeye closely resembles his model, Frank 'Rocky' Fiegel. The 'real' Wimpy, J. William Schuchert, wasn't quite as corpulent and pessimistic as his comic strip counterpart. Dora Paskel was also much nicer than Olive, known as Popeye's skinny and screechy sweetheart. The Museum is located in what used to be the Opera House, with a big picture of all the protagonists of Popeye's comic strips on the front brick wall. I managed to grab the last remaining pipe and also bought the much-needed Popeye's can of spinach to supply Martin with extra energy in his moments of crisis. We also located a Popeye Statue next to Chester Bridge, honoring the character and its creator. Borut got a chance to pose next to it for the cameras, but Martin didn't have time for any such games as he had to make his way across





*Stronger and more courageous than Popeye (above); Rapids ahead – buckle up! (below)*



## Tuesday, August 13 – Day Forty

### LIGHTNING

Martin started his day's swim in Grand Tower, Illinois. The weather was unpredictable; there were many storms and lightning kept flashing all around Martin. His accompanying team felt very uncomfortable, but Martin didn't even consider stopping. His mind had been set on that point a long time ago. The schedule of swimming was made and stopping would only mean not being able to reach his goal. But then all of a sudden – lightning strikes. Martin felt enormous pressure mounting, "It felt like a bulldozer had squeezed me and thrown me out of the water. Maybe I was even unconscious for a second," said Martin.

Lightning struck an iron buoy, marking the path along which Martin was swimming. He was only 10 feet behind it when it happened and the blast was so strong that the buoy got forced down the river. The team panicked; their first concern was to reach the shore as soon as possible. This is how Martin remembers this dreaded moment, "The accompanying boat made its way to me and we somehow managed to reach the shore; the visibility was extremely poor because of the downpour. When we reached the shore we had our lunch."

Not even this incident could sidetrack him. He continued his swimming as if nothing had happened, to Cape Girardeau, where there was a planned stop. This is what Borut wrote in his journal, "What an awful day it was! A buoy right next to Martin got struck by lightning. David and Byron related the story, whereas Matt was shivering with cold and probably also with fear."

Despite the bad weather and lightning, Martin managed to cover 40 miles on this day, which the members of the team will never forget. In such moments, Guy Haglund's words take on a new, different meaning, "There's no time for planning. Each decision has to be made fast and it can only be temporary. Whatever was decided the previous day could change in the next. Reporters ask Martin what he thinks about and they always get evasive replies; each mile he swims has a story of its own."

What did Martin think about when he realized that lightning had struck a buoy which he'd just left behind him?

"I didn't count on lightning in my psychological preparations. What happened is proof of how risky our whole project actually is. All our hopes could've disappeared in a second. It was a close call and we were very lucky."





*"We couldn't see a thing and then all of a sudden – a flash..." (above); "...and I went flying out of the water." (below)*



Each one of the three kayakers perceived the raging storm and the most critical moments of the entire expedition in a different way.

Matthew Mohlke: "A sheet of white appeared on the horizon. The river had disappeared. FLASH, CRACK, FLASH, BOOM. We felt it before we heard it. A bolt of light entered the green can and bounced off behind us. Byron and Dave were 10 yards from the buoy. The blast lifted Martin and jolted him three feet."

Byron Curtis: "We paddled into drenching hard rain. At mile 61.7 we approached a green buoy marker. I was going to pass it in 6-10 feet and thought about which side to go around it. I decided to follow Martin and get between him and the buoy. I passed within a paddle's length of it. Just as I passed by, there was a great bolt of blinding light. "The buoy was struck," Dave shouted. I had just passed it two seconds earlier. It was a fearful encounter. I was not sure if the buoy took the hit that may have been intended for me, or if I was just too close to the buoy under the circumstances. Either way I was glad to still be paddling."

David Hale: "It was 10 minutes away from lunch, when we pushed into a super cell. Lightning was everywhere. We had already seen lightning strike 100 meters away. Visibility was zero. A total white out. We could barely see each other. A green buoy emerged out of the storm. I remember watching Byron out left seconds before a bolt hit the marker. We were 5 feet away. The images will always be with me. Matt guiding Martin past the buoy. Byron cutting left away from it. The hair on my hands standing straight up. The flash as the bolt hit. The shock wave and the knowledge that we made it. We were lucky. Nobody will ever know how close we came today. We were just plain lucky."



1. Nature shows the other face (L)
2. 15 minutes after lightning struck – the expressions on the faces tell the whole story (R)
3. The smiles return – we're still alive (R)



## Tuesday, August 27 – Day Fifty-five

### EXHAUSTION

Martin was starting to show serious signs of physical exhaustion. No one could break records in marathon swimming without the efforts taking their toll on the body.

Martin passed Vicksburg, which is where the first bottle of Coca-Cola was produced. The day was ideal for swimming; sunny with no wind and also no waves. Focusing on his goal and the beautiful day, Martin managed to put his pains aside and covered 44 miles by the end of the day. When he crawled out on to the shore, he just lay there for a while, feeling incredibly exhausted. This is what Borut had to say, "I haven't seen Martin this tired in a long time. Also, I spotted a gator with my binoculars. It was floating in a little bay by the river."



1. *The hunger is setting in (L)*
2. *More slime on the menu (L)*
3. *The realm of birds and fish (R)*
4. *A portrait after 55 days of swimming (R)*



## Sunday, September 7 – Day Sixty-six

According to the original plan, Martin would have to cover the last 20 miles of his journey between Fort Jackson and Head of Passes, Louisiana. However, he was still 2 days and 55 miles away from his goal. While swimming, Martin was telling himself that he could cover those remaining miles dead if necessary. Although he was by then completely physically exhausted, he was convinced that nothing could stop him from touching the board with the 0 on it. Strong wind was coming from the south, creating the high and fast waves which were splashing in his face. He couldn't feel any pain anymore because his face was by then covered with wounds and totally sunburned.

This is how Borut described Martin's condition, "Martin is totally exhausted and lacking sleep. He's got bad bruises below the knees, a burnt face, chafed and bleeding lips and his hearing is almost gone. I dress his wounds every day and grease them, so that the pain wouldn't be as bad during the day."

Martin was mechanically doing the strokes, conquering the mighty river mostly with his mind. His spirit was stronger than any part of his body. The ancient Greek saying about the spirit being stronger than the body was manifested in its purest form. Those who say that Martin's swimming is not a sport are actually right. His swimming on the Mississippi has proved to be much more than a sport in the common sense of the word. It's a

*The number of Slovene reporters keeps growing as well*



battle of man with the forces of nature, a battle in which man has again proven his determination and unyielding spirit in the leisurely civilized world. It's a lot more than just sport.

Despite a severe storm, Martin swam hard until 4 p.m. He would have kept going if it hadn't been for the reception with William Perry in New Orleans. He had covered another 20 miles; there were only 35 remaining.

There were many nice words and warm feelings at the reception, where everyone was already rejoicing in Martin's victory. All the guests at dinner were happy and proud to be a part of this historic event. The musicians from Trebnje provided a friendly atmosphere and David, one of the accompanying kayakers who had been with Martin since the start, provided a big surprise – he got married to the lovely Sara. In doing so he paid his tribute to Martin and let him know in the best possible way how important this project was for him and what he felt for Strel.

This is how Jelko Kacin described the reception, "The reception in New Orleans, hosted by Dr. William Perry, was very special and original. Perry flew from the West Coast to hold the reception and even learned a line from the





*The skin is sore and chafed (above); Open sores at the joints (below)*



feast our eyes on the Mississippi Delta. It was the first time that I got to fly in a helicopter with the side doors opened; it was awesome!

Martin started at 7 a.m. and was already close to Head of Passes at 10:30 a.m. – that’s where the sign that reads 0 miles is.”

“Everyone got on the boat which followed Martin; the whole team, the press and the people who flew over to see the final act of this incredible historic event.

*I conquered  
the river and I  
conquered  
my mind –  
the joy at the  
end*



*A  
Slovene-  
American  
victory*



*Now we  
can count  
the  
crocodiles*



A lot of us had tears in our eyes when we saw Martin touch the sign and drink a glass of the Mississippi water, by then already salty. We jumped into the water so that we could touch the sign of which we dreamt for the past 68 days. But only after a couple of snapshots we had to take our leave from what seemed the most beautiful place on earth, because a liner was approaching and its waves could have banged our boat against the wooden poles to which it was tied.”

“The atmosphere on the boat while it was sailing towards the land was amazing. Slovene and American flags were flying high and the telephones kept ringing. At that moment the whole of Slovenia and the rest of the world knew that my father had accomplished the impossible – he had conquered the Mississippi.

For many people the project was over, but not for me. I still had to collect all of the equipment and prepare it for the journey back.

Martin was starting to get e-mails from everywhere with people congratulating him. He even got two

faxes from Milan Kučan, the President of Slovenia and Janez Drnovšek, the Prime Minister.

The next day Martin, Jelko, Tomaž Menih and I flew to New York. We were received by Milan Kučan and the members of the Slovene consulate.”

“On September 11 we took part in the ceremony in front of the United Nations headquarters commemorating the 1-year anniversary of the terrorist attacks. This was especially important because Martin also symbolically swam for





the victims of the attacks. In the afternoon the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr. Kofi Annan received us. In the evening we also met with Dr. Dimitrij Rupel, who had flown in from Slovenia that day.

On the next day, Martin and I went to Washington D.C., where he had an interview via satellite for CNN in Atlanta – amazing technology. Wherever we went I could feel the deep respect and admiration for Martin’s accomplishment. The Americans were grateful that Martin had dedicated his feat to the victims of September 11.”

“In the afternoon we were already on our way to Frankfurt and from then on to Brnik, the main Slovene airport. Among the crowd of people gathered I noticed the beaming Anton Majzelj of Mobitel, Tatjana Fink of Trimco and Franc Strgar, the same man under whose bridge Strel had swum in St. Paul and was greeted by France’s daughter Susan. We got the same warm welcome in Trebnje and everywhere else we went in Slovenia. It started dawning on me that I was really part of something historic.”

And these are Jelko Kacin’s final words regarding this incredible endeavor, which shifted the borders of the impossible, “I have thought long and hard about the adventurous spirit of St. Louis, but the fact remains that no American has managed to defeat the mighty Mississippi from the source to the mouth. Martin did just that and did it in one go; he achieved the impossible in one stroke, so to speak, even though he made over 2 million. The resolution submitted to the US Congress by Congressman Oberstar undisputedly confirms the fact that Strel was the first one to succeed in such a feat.

While staying in New York and Washington D.C., Martin could fully grasp the greatness of his achievement. First there was the reception with the President of Slovenia, Milan Kučan, then the memorial ceremony outside the UN headquarters and the reception with Mr. Kofi Annan, the recognition from the Mayor of New York, Mr. Bloomberg and finally the reception with Congressman James Oberstar in Washington D.C. and the declaration which Mr. Oberstar submitted to the Congress. All of these things made his victory burst over the banks of the Mississippi; Martin Strel had become a citizen of the world.”

