

Visiting French Hospital in Speedos – 17th September 2006

Laura Lopez-Bonilla

My Channel Swim,

Capt Matthew Webb said, 'Nothing Great Is Easy'. If I applied that to my Channel swims I might add '...and all my swims have a little drama attached!!!!'

I made an unsuccessful solo attempt early in August this year. I was dragged out screaming and kicking (this, apparently, is a quaint overall English phrase, not entirely accurate in my case – but I was really upset) after 15 hours. We were 2.8 miles off Cap Gris Nez and I pretty much would have swum to a standstill but still short of the grand prize. I was very disheartened and disappointed. I had swum well. I was very patient. I swam from feed to feed. I never asked where we were. I never looked up to see how far France was. I just swam my heart out. After all, I had been waiting two years to do this swim, after another unsuccessful attempt in 2004. (It's weird but, even though I had successfully completed a solo crossing at my first attempt in 2002, these two 'failures' had eclipsed that achievement to the point where I didn't really feel I had succeeded. Conclusion: Channel swimmers are nuts!).

If you are not a 10 or a 12/13 hour swimmer, I think your swim really starts after 10 or 12 hours. Also, when twilight and darkness come, it becomes a different swim. Communication and keeping yourself close to the boat become crucial. When it got dark, on my earlier attempt this year, and, with all my open water experience, I wasn't able to keep proper station to the boat well and I had difficulty communicating with my crew and they with me. Also, despite the clear goggles, I couldn't see the boat well. I was angry with myself afterwards because I should have dealt with those situations better.

The day after that swim I had already decided to try again this season because, like Freda said, "One year is a long time to wait". And I just couldn't wait, because I knew I had done the training and I had the tenacity, the determination, the will, and the lunacy to make another attempt.

So, I returned from a two week linguistic holiday in France reenergized and raring to go. However, the weather in August wasn't particularly favourable for swims and now I wasn't number one on the tide. I was at the back of the queue. The tide between the end of August and the beginning of September passed by and only two or three days were good for swims. But by mid September, the weather changed and the long awaited Indian summer had finally arrived. I finally got my chance on September, 17th.

At the wheel was Captain Oram and the Queen herself, Alison Streeter, and as crew I had Del Carter, Cliff Golding and our friend Cathie Slevin. Completing the ensemble was Robert, the official observer from the CS&PF.

We started off early around 6:09 am to make the most of the daylight hours. The sun took ages to come out, and when it did, around 12 pm, it had already started to change direction and was on the other side of the boat, so I was shaded a bit. This wasn't an issue as the water was warm and I never felt chilly or cold during the swim.

I got to the first shipping lane in about 3 hours and 30 minutes. I swam well, I fed well and I was happy. A few ships passed by, fairly close to each other in the SW lane, just the usual Channel traffic. After 6 hours, the wind got up a bit, and it just got a bit choppy. There were times when I thought I was going to have a drink out of Alison's mug, the way the boat was rocking! Mike said after that it was a F3/4 at that point but really, it was nothing I couldn't cope with or hadn't encountered before (remember Kate Mason and I in Jersey, Charlie?). I just got on with my swim.

At 6 hours Cathie came in to keep me company. I went through the usual bad patch at around 7 and a half hours, but my crew pumped up the Maxim (and the volume!) on the next feed, and off I went. Then Cathie swam with me again at around 10 hours.

The only bit of information I had requested was to know when I was out of the North East lane and in in-shore waters. This information came at 11 hours and I put 3 fingers out to ask my crew whether I had another 3 hours to reach the coast. At the pace I was doing Mike thought I had between 2 and a

half and 3 and we were heading towards Cap Blanc Nez, the place where I landed in 2002. Then, it got dark. I broke my lightstick which I had pinned at the back of my costume at the start of the swim and changed my goggles for clear ones placing another light stick under the strap at the back of my hat. Three more lightsticks were put on the side to help me maintain the line of the boat and phase two of my swim began. I wasn't going to jeopardize my swim this time, so I was very disciplined and maintained the line much better than my previous swim. But when it gets dark, the swim "takes on a different light". The crew has to be more vigilant to spot any signs of deterioration in the swimmer and the swimmer has to be more communicative (and this is the last thing you want to do!) to make sure the crew knows that you are ok.

Then Mike told me I had 2 more feeds. "Counting this one" I said. "No, two more after this one", he said. "Well, that's three then", I said. They all laughed on the boat. We were heading towards Cap Blanc Nez and that I had about 3,000 yards to go. I was so thrilled, so close, and yet I had to do the biggest of efforts. My pace had now slowed down considerably and the last 800 metres of the swim were endless. I was a bit confused to see lights in the background as I knew that there are no houses in Cap Blanc. I was dreading that the tide had turned and that we were now heading towards Calais or Belgium! But I just kept swimming knowing that I was going to make it. Suddenly, Cliff was in the water, to my left to direct me towards the beach. This meant that Mike couldn't get the boat any closer. We were about 200 metres from the beach. Cliff kept shouting at me to aim right. I didn't know it but he could see I was heading for wooden stakes stretching out from the beach into the sea. Then he said the magic words: "You can now stand up!". "Great", I thought. "I made it". I tried to stand but my legs were like jelly, I had really bad cramps on my hip flexors, my thighs and my calves. It was a really strange feeling. I just couldn't stand up. My legs were unable to sustain my weight. I tried again, and the surf threw me back onto the water. One more time, and the same thing happened. And again, but this time I fell face down onto the water and scared the hell out of Cliff. He knew he couldn't help me so just screamed at me to crawl one hand over the other out of the water. "Laura, just crawl, crawl"....So I did, and cleared the water on all fours at Sangatte which lies between Cap Blanc Nez and Calais. I was on my chin straps (another quaint English phrase!), but I had made it in 15 hours and 21 minutes and I was just so relieved.

All the shouting from Cliff and the boat and with the searchlight shining on the beach, had attracted the attention of a Frenchman who lived in one of the houses on the beach. He had evidently watched the proceedings for several minutes and, alarmed at my exhausted state, took it upon himself to ring the Police and the Ambulance service!!! Aaargh! Now look what I've done – caused an international incident!

By now I had managed to stand up, and was hoping that the dinghy would come to pick us up as I didn't feel well enough to swim back to the boat. Mike had realized this and was trying to get the dinghy over the surf but then he saw that we had disappeared!!! The kind hearted French man had procured towels to put around me and, suddenly, three paramedics had arrived on the beach (the tide was in and the road is about ten metres from the beach). Despite our polite protestations, they told us we were going to the Calais hospital for a check up!!! Double Aaargh!!

But, we knew that we were now 'in the system' and should go with the flow. So, Cliff and I were escorted into this heated ambulance. I was placed on a stretcher and, with the blowers on warp factor 5 at 35°C, I started to warm up while the paramedic in attendance was sweating his socks off! After checking my body temperature they said I had mild hypothermia (34.4 C) but despite us explaining that that was par for the course (OK, so maybe that was a bit flippant but I was beginning to recover and wanted them to know I was OK) they decided I was sufficiently cold/mad enough to require a trip to casualty.

In the meantime, Mike was back on the boat and he, Ali, Del, observer and friend Cathie were wondering where we had got to as you can't actually see the road (or the blue flashing lights) from the water. But the paramedics informed the coastguards at Cap Gris Nez, who, in turn, informed Mike, and, assured that we were OK, Mike set a course for the marina in Calais.

When we got to the hospital, Cliff in his Speedos and I strapped to a stretcher wrapped in blankets, we had the devoted attention of 8 nurses and 3 doctors, who were fascinated by the arrival of an Englishman and a Spanish woman covered in sand.

I was given a shower, a clean nightie and directed to a bed in a corridor. Cliff had been given a blanket and we were given dinner and had the VIP treatment from all the nurses. We told them all about Channel swimming and the craziness of our extreme sport and they were fascinated.

During our feast Cliff and I discussed the next plan of action. How were we going to get back to the boat? We had no money, no clothes, no phones! Between the two of us, we managed to remember Angie Oram's home number. We tell her where we are and give her the telephone number at the hospital. Alison rings us. Aleluyah! Communication had been reestablished with the mother ship and we breathed a sight of relief.

Right, all sorted. Mike had now pulled up in Calais and he had some Euros. So, all we had to do was get discharged, get a taxi and meet them at the Marina in Calais. Great. But how, we think, scratching our heads? We had no clothes....No, no, pas de problème, the nurses say...as they bring out an assortment of charity clothes for us to choose and pick. I managed to find some matching items, a pair of printed leggings and a red jumper with a scarf, but Cliff walked out of the hospital with a company t-shirt with CAMP written on the front (and back!) and a bandage for a belt holding the huge waisted jean trousers up. After shaking hands and thanking the busy staff at the casualty department, we walked out of hospital to a waiting taxi, dressed in chic charity clothes with a pair of hospital plastic overshoes, and a plastic bag which contained our swimming gear. I had to explain to the taxi driver that I had no money, but that a friend was going to meet us at the Marina. God knows what he thought. Mike and Ali just couldn't stop laughing when they saw us. Despite the fact that I was pretty spent at the end of the swim the last two hours after the swim were surreal and hilarious. Trust me to add some drama to my swim.

Laura Lopez-Bonilla (Spain): Dover to Sangatte, September, 17th 2006 - 15 hours and 21 minutes.

P.S. Thanks Mike, thanks Ali, thanks Del, thanks Cliff, thanks Cathie, thanks Robert. We have the nutty ideas but you guys make it happen for us. I am a very happy Spaniard!!