

KEVIN CASSIDY'S 2009 ENGLISH CHANNEL SWIM

To be absolutely honest, I had no idea that my own personal challenge of swimming the English Channel would be a magnet for so much attention, particularly when it has utterly nothing to do with running. In the four days since I landed on the French coast, I have been literally bombarded with messages of support/congratulations. I think I had over 300 messages via SMS, several messageboards [*some of which I was not even aware of!!*], facebook [*however that works!*] and even a "twitter" site. Exactly how twitter works or what it is has me perplexed but thanks to Carmen in Sydney for doing whatever it is she did with it!!

Responding to everyone would be close to impossible, so I hope I have avoided offending anyone.

Just to wind back the clock a smidgeon, my initial knowledge of the English Channel goes back to my teenage years when we would get oodles of media coverage about the great Des Renford's battles with the channel in the 70's.

February 2003 was when I got to meet an English Channel swimmer in person [*Paul McGuire*] and peruse all his photos and memorabilia. Given that my running days seemed to be rapidly grinding to a halt and I was dabbling in the summer bay swims around Melbourne, it struck me instantly as a challenge I should undertake at some stage.

Looking at Paul at that time, he was quite a lean individual. However, in his channel photos from eight months prior, he was "portly" to say the least.....well, to get to the point, he was quite fat. This puzzled me somewhat until he explained the need for body fat as insulation against the cold water. The notion of getting fat repulsed me and I immediately dispatched any channel swimming aspirations to the very distant backblocks of my brain. 2004 was a semi respectable year of running for me and the channel never crossed my thoughts all that time.

2005 dished up a vast decline in my running and by 2006, I was virtually a crippled wreck. And so began the rekindling of my inclinations towards an English Channel swim.

By sheer chance, I linked up with the Black Rock Icebergers [*who boast five channel swimmers amongst them*] and the metamorphosis was under way. Go to www.black-ice.com.au to learn more about our eclectic gang of swimmers.

Having only ever swum in heated pools [*27 degrees*] and Port Phillip Bay during summer [*21 degrees*] wrapped up in a wetsuit, my initial lesson was to adapt to cold water. I'll never forget suffering in the 14 degree water at Parkdale beach on November 2nd 2006. I stood knee deep and froze as the others dived in around me. With no desire to look like a complete wimp, I finally hit the water in a moment that shocked my body beyond description. At the completion of the swim, I had lost all feeling in my hands and feet, had turned blue and shook uncontrollably while the others sat and enjoyed breakfast!!!

But here is the thing, the human body is so very adaptable. As one who suffered in the cold more than anyone else during all those long winter runs around the Yarra Ranges, I never thought I could cope with cold water. I had seen the Brighton Icebergers from afar on my regular runs and thought they were absolutely crazy....which they are!!....but never dreamt I would become one of them.

As my 30 odd years of running faded away, my plans of an English Channel swim had begun. As the winter of 2007 set in, I just kept getting in the water each day and swimming. By July, the water temperature at Brighton Sea Baths had dropped to 6.2 degrees, the coldest recorded there for many, many years as a sprinkling of snow fell in the Dandenongs. I can happily report that my first Melbourne winter of swimming was nothing short of horrendous. I'd arrive in the early morning darkness with the car heater blaring and coat around my shoulders. Then I'd pause in the carpark with the heater still running and tell myself that I could easily go back to bed and no one would notice!! Regardless, I persevered and it soon became habit to leap out of the car, don the budgie smugglers and go charging into the water.

Something Paul McGuire said stuck with me. "You're going to find that you fall in love with cold water

swimming and you'll be quite comfortable out there with all the extra weight". I initially looked at him sideways wondering how anyone could enjoy the cold but three years later, he has proven to be right on the money.

The pursuit of long swimming events then took me all over Australia. It seemed odd to travel to Sydney on the same weekend as the Six Foot Track [*a race I looked forward to in the early 90s*] and not go anywhere near it, preferring instead to swim the Harbour Bridge to Manly race!!

Perth to Rottnest, Townsville to Magnetic Island and the Lake Burley Griffin 9km all became regular favourites but the one thing they had in common was the warm water.....much warmer than the English Channel.

On and on piled the body fat as I came to terms with the fact that running was going to have to cease. The August night in 2007 when I wiped out my ankle was certainly not what I had designed but I reflect upon it as a blessing in disguise.

The fattening up process has been interesting to say the least. My best running was done at 65 kilograms and I was around 70 when the channel became a serious prospect. The best advice was that I would essentially need to get up to at least 84!! Make no bones about it, all the eating was fun until I stagnated at 81 kilograms some six weeks prior to my channel swim. This was where the fun stopped. Cramming in family sized pizzas followed by two litres of ice cream is not a pleasant feeling at all. Bloating is barely half a description. Regardless, I hit my 84 kilogram target with two weeks to go. Sadly, my favourite running shirts no longer fit and a pair of "fat jeans" that I bought a while back knowing I would grow into them have promptly been grown out of!!

Adapting to the cold was the biggest learning curve. The short swim in 14 degree water three years ago almost killed me. This year, with the water at 15 degrees on Anzac Day, I swam for eight hours around Black Rock feeling comfortably warm.

Paul McGuire was correct, you do fall in love with the cold. The Brighton Marina soon became a favourite training venue and most swims occurred at 6am, several at 5am and a couple of them at 4am!! These swims were not without incident, of course. Swimming straight into a moored boat was one of my better tricks and god knows what the fisherman thought when they shone their torches off the pier to see what the splashing was all about...only to see a swimmer go past!!

The sight of winter swimmers around Brighton is nothing new but my decision to swim Lysterfield Lake each Tuesday morning this winter attracted some seriously bizarre looks from the occasional dog walker and/or runner. However, nothing...I REPEAT NOTHING.....could equal the reaction I got recently when a crew of warmly clad tree loppers were working in the car park area as I stripped down and hit the water. The lake seems to have an extra sting of cold than Port Phillip Bay and it's somewhat of a spiritual feeling to swim slowly up the misty lake with only the occasional eel for company.

Swimming the English Channel is an undertaking that requires much planning. As a relatively narrow strip of water between two large seas, the tides are incredibly strong and change rapidly. The shortest distance as the crow flies between Dover in England and Cap Gris Nez on the French coast is 34 kilometres. Regardless, any hopes of finishing on the cape are slim indeed. With the tide changing direction at approximately six hour intervals, you are guaranteed a large "S" bend as you swim. As you get closer to France, the tides actually get much stronger and you can find yourself swimming side on to the coast for many hours without getting any closer!! Because of all the varying factors, an excellent and knowledgeable boat pilot is essential and I had the best in the business in Mike Oram. Other considerations are whether to go on a shallow or deep tide. The deep tides usually provide calmer water but will push you further east and west. The shallow tides occur in the first and third quarters of the lunar cycle. The actual time of the summer in which you swim can also have a degree of influence with the need to weigh up the pros and cons of the longer daylight hours in July or an extra degree in water temperature in August.

Flying across the oceans on route to England, the realisation that a three year project was about to be put on the line was paramount in my mind. Clearly, I must have looked an odd sight on the plane dressed up in face

mask and rubber gloves but the last thing I wanted was to have it all unravel at the hands of a coughing and sniffing germ bag seated behind me!!

Upon arrival in Dover, the sight of the impeccably flat water on the channel had my heart racing. My tide wasn't due for another three days, so I could only hope that the weather would hold. Of course, it didn't as "Murphy's Law" reared its ugly head and I was left to sit and stagnate as we waited for some calmer conditions.

During this period, I got to meet many channel aspirants at the beach on Dover Harbour. Several had travelled from overseas to spend months training there!! Many would ultimately fail to finish. It reinforced to me just how lucky I was to be able to train with several channel swimmers in my own backyard down at Brighton. It's a fact that more people have conquered Mount Everest than the English Channel.

My first two days of waiting were an absolute psychological torture test with nothing to do other than stare at the water and read "interesting" stories in the newspapers about nil all draws at the soccer or the all important darts results! Alternatively, you could while away the time dining at Dino's restaurant where the two waiters took the word "incompetent" to dizzy new heights. Honestly, it was a case of Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dumber!!! They even had a dessert called "spotted dick pudding" which left me wondering!! Basil Fawlty would have been enormously proud!!

I can't have been very good company, but I did settle over the next few days as the wind continued to blow and my potential start times kept getting postponed. It finally happened on the morning of August 17th. We gathered in the Marina and loaded the boat with a variety of supplies then slowly motored around to the pebbles on Shakespeares Beach as I got lathered in grease and pinned my fluoro light onto my bathers. On board were Mike Oram as pilot with James assisting. Jane Murphy was also present as the official observer who would record everything that occurred in a large handwritten document as well as ensuring that no rules were broken. As for my own crew, I was privileged to have three remarkable individuals who made the trip from Australia purely for my benefit. I'll expand a little later on Jeremy, Kathy and Kerry.

It was 8am when I hit the water heading to my left on the shallow tide. Conditions were good, the crew were cheery and all was good in the world. Basically, this is how it stayed for the first six hours as I swam out through the large container ships in the North-West passage. I was feeding every 30 minutes on a carbohydrate mix known as Maxim heated to 40 degrees to help prevent hypothermia in the 17 degree water. This was working fine for a while but I was soon vomiting it back up. A reduction in the mixing rates soon sorted things and it was full steam ahead.

It was somewhere between the sixth and seventh hour that the day took on a whole new composition. The wind was picking up, producing a decent sized swell. As the wind grew, white caps starting hitting me from the right. Even with all his experience, it seemed to take Mike by surprise as he insisted it hadn't been forecast. Kerry told me quite pertinently that I should "just not look ahead"!! Mike wouldn't actually say so, but he gave a strong impression that we wouldn't have started if he had known what lay ahead.

Under normal circumstances, swimmers are permitted some company at certain times but Mike promptly said "NO" in such conditions, thinking that it was going to be hard enough to watch one swimmer, let alone two in a swell that was getting close to two metres.

Basically, the rough weather remained and my swim became a slugfest. I was dumped upon more times than I care to remember and was swallowing water constantly. The boat was bouncing around furiously and I feared it would tip onto me on several occasions. As for the crew, well seasickness was the order of the day and I had the "privilege" of witnessing several vomits being projected over the side, all of which matched my own spectacular vomiting efforts as I continued to expel all the water I was swallowing.

Passing half way, some Russian battle ships cruised through the South-West passage up ahead. The sight of my little Australian flag on board was clearly the catalyst that had them scuttling away in fear!

Trying to feed became about as difficult as getting Julia Gillard's hair to look trendy. One particularly memorable moment was when I tried to get down a cup of baked beans. Just as I tipped the cup, a wave

broke on top of me from behind filling my stomach with water and smashing the baked beans all over my face. I had genuine fears of our journey taking on a resemblance to the S.S. Minnow's three hour tour! Kerry laughingly recalled the next day that it was a comical sight indeed, despite the fact that it almost drowned me!! The worst thing about the wind was that it stopped the tide taking me wide of the cape which would ordinarily have meant I would be pulled back into one of the coastal beaches. This, in turn, meant that at the impending the change of tide, I was going to be pushed a long way left and well and truly on my way to Calais Harbour some 20 kilometres east of Cap Griz Nez.

The forward slog continued as my throat and tongue became increasingly sorer. In order to stay positive, I allowed my mind to wander. I started singing Michael Jackson's "One Day in Your Life" and "Burning Love" by Elvis.....two songs I absolutely detest!! I even started reminiscing about my childhood. In particular, my first birthday when I received a teddy bear, only to leave it out in the sand pit all night in the rain which had me bawling my eyes out!! I started looking forward to anything different, like hitting a piece of seaweed and, believe it or not, my next vomit!!!!!!

For several hours, the white cliffs of Cap Blanc Nez looked tantalisingly close as the sun started to set but then they just vanished, I knew immediately that the tide had turned. I didn't identify it at the time, but apparently I swam on the spot for almost 90 minutes! Darkness set in and I was barely three kilometres from the coast but the strong sideways tide refused to allow me to get any closer. The waves kept breaking as the lights of Calais didn't get any nearer for over two hours. Mental torture is a mild description indeed. On the plus side, the cold wasn't bothering me at all. Testing me for lucidity, Kerry asked me to repeat the gate code for the Dover Marina. My immediate response elicited a round of applause!

Only when the water started to smooth out did I realise that I must be getting close. So strong was the tide that I actually went beyond Calais Harbour.

In pitch darkness and with no conception of where I was, Mike leant out of the boat yelling "follow this rock wall and the beach is 400 metres away"

I dug in hard for what seemed like a tortured eternity until something suddenly hit me on the bottom of my right hand!! It was sand!!! YIPPEE, I was in France, I stood in knee deep water and walked clear onto a small dry beach. A three year journey had finished in triumph. The time was spot on midnight. My crossing had taken 16 hours exactly. I stood alone in the darkness for no more than 30 seconds and sucked it all in before swimming back to the boat where I surprised all on board by hauling myself up the ladder unaided.

Kerry was thinking it a shame that no one could see the finish but to be quite succinct, I thought it was rather symbolic given that most of my training was done alone in the early morning darkness back home in Brighton.

Quickly getting into some warm clothing, it was no time for modesty. Off went the bathers quick smart and I was soon wrapped in several layers of thermal clothing. To quote Daryl Kerrigan, my bathers, cap and goggles will be going "straight to the pool room".

The three hour trip back to Dover had me wishing a helicopter could have picked us all up in Calais as I continued to vomit up the contents of my stomach so furiously that my nose started bleeding!! Arriving back at the hotel at 4am, I showered but found it impossible to sleep due to bad swelling and soreness of my tongue and throat and a very tender ribcage from all the vomiting. Meanwhile, the crew were all sporting a number of small bruises and sore spots from having been tossed around the boat like the proverbial rag dolls.

Badly dehydrated and unable to speak or get any food or fluid down, the next 24 hours proved horrendous but it didn't prevent me relishing in the traditional signing of the wall in the bar of Dover's White Horse pub, an establishment that is somewhat of a tourist attraction.

I haven't a clue how bad the irritation in my throat is, but four days later, I'm only just starting to get down solid food without pain. A special thanks here to my hotel for sympathising with me and dishing up exclusive serves of mashed potato and gravy.

For the immediate two days after the swim, I sat high on the cliffs of Dover staring out at the flat calm water and wondering what might have been if the weather gods had smiled a little more kindly upon me. On the other hand, I glowed with the satisfaction of not only having conquered the channel, but having done so on one if it's rougher days.

As I type, I'm sitting in a hotel room in Calais [*having got here via the Chunnel this time!!!*]. Today involved finding the small section of beach where I landed, a task made particularly difficult given that it was in front of the large dockland area. After two hours and almost getting arrested by border security [*I don't speak a word of French*], I sat alone on the sand. The enormity of it all suddenly hit me. I was overcome by an inner sense of accomplishment. Money can't buy it, governments can't legislate against it and company boards can't vote on it. I have run numerous ultras in the past, many of them much longer in time than what I spent in the channel, but this was far tougher than any running event I've tackled.

Although it was never my motivation, a few inquiries seem to suggest that no one else has completed an English Channel – Western States 100 mile double [*albeit 12 years apart*], however I'd be happy to be corrected.

I was asked what my next challenge might be. I'm not exactly sure but given that I have no desire to shove syringes into my forearm each day, it sure won't be the Tour de France! If it's OK with the organisers and as long as they don't object to a fat, slow, ageing old goat in their field, I wouldn't mind kick starting a bit of running again by lumbering my way through the Sri Chinmoy 5km fun run at Williamstown in December....Oh, and maybe eradicate those family pizzas and ice cream from my dietary lifestyle!!

Now for a few words on the crew who, in a brief moment of black humour, renamed my channel swim the "Poo and Spew Cruise" for reasons that require no further clarification.

Jeremy Hornby: Now living and working in Spain, Jeremy was a regular amongst the open water swims in Melbourne for many years and sacrificed his work and family time to travel to Dover at his own expense. One of the world's genuine nice guys.

Kerry White: One of Melbourne's best open water swimmers who wins a swag of age group prizes in a veritable procession. I didn't really know Kerry that well until discovering we were both doing Perth to Rottneest early in 2008. Seeing Kerry's attentive looks on the boat with every breath I took was a real comfort and she was so encouraging throughout. She really stepped up to the plate and had the feeding plan under control when others were dying with seasickness. Oh, and did I mention that she rescued me from my inadequate technological skills by manacling my wireless internet into some sort of working order when I didn't even know where the "on-off" switch was?

Kathy Garnett [AKA "PsychoChicken"]: All the way from Toodyay, 100 kilometres out of Perth!! Photographer extraordinaire, runner, high diver and gymnast, Kathy made the trip simply because it sounded like fun after I jokingly [*but hopefully*] suggested her skills would be good value on board. She had her camera constantly clicking everywhere and was the only one on board to avoid seasickness. As a result, she also became heavily involved in my feed breaks. Her special delivery of the "magic mouthwash" was a task and a half all on its own. Approximately 20 of her 250 plus photos can be seen at:

<http://kath-photography.blogspot.com/2009/08/changing-day.html>

For a wider overview of Kathy's excellent photographic talents, visit her blog site at: <http://kath-photography.blogspot.com/>