

In Appreciation for the Donors Who Sponsored My Swim Across America

Thanks, But Glad to Get This Off the Bucket List

By Matt Lawlor

San Francisco Bay, September 25, 2010

I am happy to report that I am no longer shark bait. My September 25th swim had its moments – as described below – but I’ve turned in my gills and am safely back on land. All body parts are fully intact and my spirits elevated by our mutual achievement. Thanks to your generosity, we raised about \$28,000 for cancer research and our group of 125 swimmers from across the country raised over \$300,000. This brings Swim Across America donations to \$4 million this year – all targeted to cancer research and treatment.

It was a beautiful September morning with ideal swimming conditions. The water was calm and measured at a “balmy” 57 degrees. The sky was deep blue accented by a gentle breeze. Our psyched group of swimmers took a Bay cruiser from a Fisherman’s wharf pier to a point just beyond the Golden Gate Bridge. We spend some time on the way honoring some of the friends and family who have been touched by cancer. I visited the rest room three times.



The moment finally arrived to take the plunge. I jumped off a ship ledge about 10 feet above the water. As I pierced the water, it felt like a thousand daggers around the face and exposed areas not covered by my wetsuit. I wondered if this was first “body shock” stage of hypothermia. But as I calmed down, the water began to feel refreshing. I wondered whether if this was the second “numbing” stage of hypothermia. I then looked around for any unfriendly wildlife. None were spotted. I didn’t want to speculate whether this was the final “delusional” stage of hypothermia. So I began to swim like hell.

I did take an early moment, however, to smell the roses – or should I say the cast iron. I stopped swimming to look up directly under the Golden Gate Bridge. It was almost surreal. Right above me was this loud, massive man-made bridge framed – in sharp contrast -- by the graceful natural beauty of the hills surrounding the Bay and the distant city. In millennium-speak, it was totally awesome!

I then turned my sights toward the goal. Crissy Field Beach, site of the old SF city airfield, was 1.5 miles away along the southern shore of the Bay. It looked like about 2.5 miles away. Unfortunately, my initial assessment was more accurate than I would have liked. I managed to get caught with a few other swimmers in a flood current that took me off course. A watchful swim official motored over. He said that with the tide moving in, it was doubtful that I could ever make the beach. He advised that I be re-positioned. Hmm. Re-positioned?

It took a few minutes to fully comprehend his suggestion. He wanted to haul me to a place in the Bay where I could practically float into Crissy Field Beach. Did I fly all the way the way from Virginia and take all those cold showers for a boat ride? I told him no thank you -- in language fitting for the occasion but unfit to print here.

He shook his head in disgust and pointed to a new azimuth – essentially re-tracking my swim for a half a mile or so. I dug down inside and completed the swim, essentially swimming a “Z” course to get to the Crissy Field Beach. You donors did your part. I needed to do my part. But the story doesn’t end there.

You may have heard the old WC Fields joke, “First prize is one free week visiting Philadelphia, second prize is two free weeks in Philadelphia.” As a Penn grad, I can better appreciate Philly’s finer points. But Mr. Field’s quip may have captured the next day. As a “reward” for meeting our funds raising goals, Swim Across America arranged a “bonus” swim from Alcatraz. I was now hooked.

On the next day a group of twenty of us, including several Olympians, took three small speed boats out to The Rock. Unlike the day before, the waters were very choppy, particularly in an area just off the island called the Egg Beater. As we approached the island, we jumped into the water. Funny, this time the water felt warm. Maybe I was growing gills after all. We swam the short remaining distance to Alcatraz, and each of us picked up a small souvenir rock. On mine was etched, “Don’t cheat on your taxes. Give more to charity. Al Capone”. Not really. But it was kind of eerie and fun.

We then launched into the swim, monitored all the while by some trailing boats led by open water swimming legend Gary Emich. Gary has recorded over 700 swims to Alcatraz. He is shooting for 1000. He never uses a wetsuit. He never gets re-positioned. So with great respect, one of us asked Gary if there was optimal course to across the Alcatraz channel. He laughed, and said that he’d put a GPS chip in his swim-cap for about 6 months. He then plotted his swims, and found that not one swim matched another. The currents are that volatile.

With Gary’s guidance we made the crossing. We capped the morning swim with a big outdoor breakfast, basking in the sun with a unique, shared experience that we would likely never forget.

What a weekend! Thank you all so much for your sponsorship. To me, it was more than another checkmark on the bucket list. It was a re-affirmation that there’s nothing like a community or team working together to do what is right and good. With your donations, I am confident that we really made a difference in the fight against cancer.

Although my swim has been completed, there’s no limit to the need to support cancer research and treatment. You can still make a donation to Swim Across America by clicking on “Make A Donation” across from this report. There also some photos, background on the swim and some corporate opportunities to sponsor my swim next year.

It was a honor to swim on behalf of all of you for such a worthy cause. It was also as a privilege to recognize close family and friends who were taken by the disease. And I am happy to report that Ray Mitchell, who I dedicated the swim, is making great progress with his cancer treatment. Ray, we are all praying and pulling for you. Keep fighting and keep positive.

Matt Lawlor