

by Julie Ridge

PIVOTAL MOMENTS

This is the story about the moment that changed me from an ordinary person into an ordinary person who did extraordinary things. It is the story of how one day, I swam from England to France.

I was in my early 20's, single, financially independent and living in Manhattan. By night, I sang on Broadway. By day, I swam a casual mile at my NYC health club. I was a poor to moderate swimmer and had always swum to stay in shape and maintain my sanity. One day, a friend who swam two miles daily, broke his wrist and couldn't swim for six weeks. I felt badly that he'd hurt himself and adopted his mileage as a sort of tribute.

Two miles a day was double my usual distance. I was surprised how easy it was to do. I decided, quite arbitrarily, to swim five straight miles one day... just to see how far I could go. I hopped in the pool and swam 360, twenty-five yard laps. I climbed out feeling a little tired, but otherwise sensational. I'd passed some physical threshold and entered a mental state that friends who'd done hallucinogens described. But, this was a natural high, and I could get it for free.

On January 1, 1982, I resolved to swim the English Channel on my 25th birthday, a mere nine months away. In truth, I knew absolutely nothing about the English Channel or how to swim it. I began where the daughter of an NIH scientist begins... with research. I read everything I could get my hands on and spoke with endurance swimmers. I was impressed with how kind they were. A common dream bound

There are few truly extraordinary people, but many ordinary people who do extraordinary things.



PIVOTAL MOMENTS

complete strangers together. I received a detailed letter from the late Doc Councilman, a famous swim coach at Indiana University, and at the time the oldest person to swim the Channel. He mapped out his entire training program for me.

I learned the basics. The waters keeping France from England spanned 21.5 miles as the crow flies. Water temperatures remain a chilly 55 to 65 degrees in the warm season (mid-July through mid-September). The Channel is the busiest waterway in the world. There were tides and currents to navigate, an English Channel Swimming Association (CSA) to contact for sanction, and an escort boat to hire, to ensure safe passage.

I modified Councilman's training program to suit my particulars. I staged a twelve-hour, nonstop pool swim at my health club. Logging

the swim was having him by my side, falling passionately in love with me as he watched my amazing feat.

I lost my desire. I wanted to crawl under a bed somewhere and sleep for about a hundred years. Then, I got mad. I hadn't sacrificed nine months of my life and gained 15 pounds for some guy, or any tangible thing. I was doing this for me.

I got on the plane, rented a car in London, and drove to Folkestone alone. As I approached town, I saw, for the first time, the gritty, choppy, gray, huge body of water I'd come to swim. The vastness of what I'd vowed to do washed over me and I was terrified!

I met swimmers from all over the world, as crazy as me, similarly wishing for their go at a swim across the puddle. There was a little detail that didn't hit home for me until I got to England though. The

There comes a time (or two or three) in every long term effort... a relationship, finishing a term paper, quitting smoking... when you want more than anything to give up. But, if you stick it out, the phase passes.

miles was easy. Training for the Channel elements in NYC was not.

I quit my Broadway show in May and went to visit family in Florida. When I visited the International Swimming Hall of Fame in Ft. Lauderdale, the director, Buck Dawson, thought it was cool that this Broadway actress thought she could swim the English Channel and he invited me to his endurance swimming camp in Canada.

I spent five of the most heavenly weeks of my life at Camp Ak-o-Mak. I trained in open, cold, luscious water, with great coaches who improved my stroke. None of the camp experts actually believed I could swim the English Channel, but they were very nice about not saying it to my face.

They encouraged me to gain weight, the best insulation against the cold water. When I wasn't swimming or sleeping, I was eating. The grand diet plan was, eat so much you never want to see food again, then swim 12 to 14 hours and drop it all in the ocean.

I headed back to NYC to collect my belongings, the sponsorship money my Broadway producer had guaranteed, and pick up my boyfriend. I was ready. A few days before my flight however, everything went wrong. The 'sponsor' my producer had promised had never in fact made any commitment. The temporary loan I'd taken was going to be long term. And, my boyfriend announced that he couldn't go. I'd paid for his nonrefundable ticket, and part of the fantasy of

ideal four to five day tides for a successful crossing occur once every fortnight (14 days), but you have to wait for optimal weather conditions... which may never occur. My tide was coming to an end and we still hadn't had a break in the weather. The reality slap was that I may have worked this hard, come all this way, wanted everything so much, and have to go home without even getting a chance.

So, on the last day of my tide, when we got the 'good weather call' from my boat captain, (which is clearance for ten to twelve hours of fairly calm seas), during my birthday dinner, the celebration was complete. My mind spun. "I was going to get my chance! This time tomorrow, I would be walking on the shores of France."

I slept perhaps three and a half minutes. My crew and I got out of bed at 3 am to eat, load the boat, and shuttle from Folkestone to the start beach in Dover, to be off before the sun. I was thoroughly greased up with an anhydrous lanolin solution to help retain body heat and cut down on chafing from my suit. I looked fit for frying.

At 5:10 am, September 10, still technically my birthday in NYC, my swim began. The sun slowly rose. I have never felt so warm and loved. On board there was Dad, my best college girlfriend, Vicki, the captain, Eric Baker, Stan the first mate, and Jackie the official witness from the Channel Swimming Association, to document that all 'rules' were observed.

At the third hour, I got my first feeding. Hot chocolate supplied calories and warmth, and soothed my tummy. Based on training experience, we'd decided on hourly feedings, given in a biking bottle, (so sea water couldn't mix in), attached to a rope, for easy retrieval. If I touched the boat or a person, a rule was broken and the swim was null.

Fourth hour. The water temperature was 66 degrees, warm by English Channel standards. However, contrasted with my 98.6 degree body temperature, it felt very, very cold, and tightened all of my muscles. My quadriceps felt as if they'd been cut. The pain was immense. My ribs ached. I felt drowsy and nearly crashed into my escort boat, the *Lady Jean*.

It was in this hour that I discovered the 'Almost-halfway-there' Phase. About halfway through most events, athletic or otherwise, the body and mind don't feel like carrying on. The body can experience true and deep pain. In my case, everything hurt, even my face, a whole lot.

The mind suffers an anguish of its own. Mine shrieked "You're an idiot!?!?! Whatever possessed you to do this stupid thing?!" I prayed for a hurricane to end it all, because if I got out after four measly hours, what would I say to the people back home who'd bet money on me to fail? As all of this rhetoric was swishing around in my brain, an hour passed and it was time for my next feeding.

Mysteriously, the pain disappeared. I was awake and humming and contemplating swimming back from France once we got there. I had heard countless stories of swimmers who quit in the fourth and fifth hours of their Channel attempts and it was then that I understood why. If only they had stuck it out, they too would have discovered it was only a passing phase. There comes a time (or two or three) in every long term effort... a relationship, finishing a term paper, quitting smoking... when you want more than anything to give up. But, if you stick it out, the phase passes.

By the ninth hour of my swim, nothing and no one was going to stop me. I felt great! Based on my calculations, I was about two thirds done. I was closer to my destination than I was to my start point. What I couldn't see or feel, was that I hadn't been stroking strongly enough to cut diagonally across the southerly central currents. I was swimming almost parallel to the French coastline, making a beeline for Spain.

Eleventh hour. I was counting the hours by my feedings and in my mind I figured I had one, maybe two hours to go. Dad reported "You're six miles away from France. Looking good." I was confused. The swim was supposed to be 21.5 miles. Six miles was almost a third of the way off France. How could this be?

Dad said encouragingly, "Start swimming really hard now, the flood tides have begun off the coast and will be pushing you away from France." Start swimming hard? I thought I'd been swimming hard for 11 hours. Ouch... I just kept swimming.

Three hours ebbed wordlessly by. My Fourteenth Hour. Dad looked very grim. His previously dark hair had turned gray. He gave the prognosis gently, "You're still five miles off the coast of France." I had been swimming for three hours into the flood tides and inched only one mile closer to shore. In training, I swam at a pace of two miles an hour. I couldn't understand how in three hours, I wasn't in France yet. I

couldn't feel the currents and didn't know I'd traveled due north. The sun was setting. I began to feel cold.

Dad said, "There's an outside chance of getting in, but it might take another six or seven more hours. You're not swimming hard enough."

Six or seven more hours? I'd worked so hard and come so far, and still, I just wasn't strong enough. I could go home and be proud of a 14-hour swim. I lifted my goggles. "I'm tired. Let's go home." Vicki readied the blankets.

I'll never know exactly what it was, maybe my tragic flaw, that inability to give up... but I just couldn't reach out and touch the boat, officially ending it all. Grasping at straws, I asked to hear what the boat captain had to say. Eric came out of his wheel house. While I'd never seen his eyes all day, he'd been the protective angel on my shoulder and we were bound in spirit. He said, "We're only three miles north of the Point (Cap Gris Nez). If you swim hard, really hard for one more hour, we may still have a shot."

I had no idea how Dad's five miles had turned into three, but I didn't care. Could I swim hard for one more hour? After 14 hours of swimming for all I was worth, an hour seemed like a long time. But, compared to the thousands of hours I hoped to live in the decades to come, an hour seemed a tiny thing. This was my Pivotal Moment. My answer? Quite simply, "Yes." Astonishingly, I began to swim really, really hard.

I didn't have any sense of time anymore and they weren't feeding me because the tide was strong and if I treaded water to feed, I lost ground. That one 'little' hour stretched to three. By then, minutes, days, they were all the same. I figured if I just kept swimming, they'd leave me alone and we'd have to get there eventually. I didn't know that if I missed the Point, we were headed back for Spain.

It was somewhere during the 17th hour I sensed excitement on board. The ocean and the air were black. I couldn't see or feel anything. Then Dad shouted "Julie, the lights of France! Do you see them?"

I looked up. Way off, embedded in the horizon, through swollen eyes, I saw what looked like millions of tiny stars. "Yes, I see them."

"It's only three-quarters of a mile honey. Keep swimming! You're almost there."

Centuries passed. Dad shouted out again. "Only half mile to go. Can you do it?"

I was thinking 'this is an endless mile,' but a deep, strong voice came from somewhere inside and said, "Yes, I can do it."

Forever and a moment passed. I looked up to see bright stars just ahead and no *Lady Jean*. I was lost, frightened. Where was my security blanket, my crew, Dad? I treaded water to get my bearings and my feet hit dirt. Mud squished between my toes. I heard our first mate Stan and Vicki in the dinghy just ahead. They were shouting and shining a bright light on a giant rock. "Just swim up and touch the rock and it will all be over!!!"

I called out, "I'm standing."

Stan said, "Great!!! Then you don't have to touch the bloody rock! Just get in the boat. Get in the boat!"

At 11:05 pm, September 10, 1982, a still greasy, much leaner, swimming machine flopped onto the dinghy. And it was over. Seventeen

PIVOTAL MOMENTS

hours and 55 minutes to complete a journey that would define my life. I became the 240th person to swim from England to France, the one in 20 who make it on the first go, and one of fewer than 500 people in the history of time who have accomplished the feat.

When I got back to NYC nothing had changed, except that I had no job, no apartment, no boyfriend and no money. But I had a strength no one could ever take away... when it would have been so much easier to let it all go, I stayed.

Over the next 25 years, I would accomplish tasks more daunting and/or outwardly impressive than my first endurance swim... a double nonstop lap around Manhattan Island, 56 miles in 21 hours; a Hawaii Ironman Triathlon; a 28.5 mile lap around Manhattan each day for five consecutive days, a Guinness Book record; a bike ride across America with Dad by my side. I sold dozens of magazine articles and a book on endurance. I married and divorced, lost and found my sanity, earned a masters degree in Social Work from Columbia University, became a foster parent, lost three foster children to institutions, and got to adopt the fourth.

I haven't always made the right or best decisions. I haven't always accomplished my goals. I can't always help the children who come into my care. But, with each success and every failure, I recall my cold truth, on that calm September day decades ago, I did not have the talent or strength to swim the English Channel. However, in that critical Pivotal Moment, I learned that getting to France was 5% talent, 5% luck, and 90% moxy.

There is an English Channel swimmer in all of us, an ordinary person capable of doing extraordinary things. I will always be looking for new and bizarre challenges. And when I die, some 50 years from now, I won't go out wondering, 'If only I had made it to France.' ❄

Julie Ridge, LCSW, swam two non-stop laps around Manhattan a year after swimming the English Channel. Her stories have been published in Life, Cosmopolitan and New Woman, among other national magazines. Currently, she lives in Manhattan with her teenage son, and works as a clinical social worker and teacher in child welfare.

I had a strength no one could ever take away... when it would have been so much easier to let it all go, I stayed.

