

An English Channel Epiphany

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I had Lewis Carroll's "The Walrus and the Carpenter" stuck in my head as I stood on Shakespeare Beach, in full dark, waiting for the signal from the official observer to begin our four-person English Channel Relay swim. "The time has come the Walrus said, to talk of many things..." And indeed, after two years of planning, and thinking, and imagining this swim, the moment had arrived.

I raised my arms signaling my readiness to begin, and the lights on the boat, drifting about a quarter mile offshore flashed, so I waded into the inky water to begin our great adventure. It was only later I learned the start signal was a horn, not flashing lights, but our alert observer started our clock as my feet touched the water, and we were on our way.

The water was cold with a surprisingly stiff chop, but I found a comfortable rhythm, approached the boat, and settled into a spot just off the port beam.



Signaling readiness to start at Shakespeare Beach



A well lite boat at Shakespeare Beach

The first of our individual hour-long swims began at 0400 and ended with a hint of dawn at 0500. Swimming to a sunrise is one of the true joys in life that open water swimmers get to savor. At 61 F (16 C) the water was cold enough to bring on numbness in the extremities, but the body core remains nice and warm. Nonetheless, I eagerly awaited the warmth of the sun's first rays as Indie, the second of our four-person team took her first pull.

Our swim began with a visit to Pathfinder and a discussion/briefing with our Pilot, Captain Eric Hartley. Eric's endless experience shepherding swimmers across the channel really made the difference for us. He gauged our abilities against the surprisingly strong current and guided us along an optimal course. At only about 33 feet (30 meters) long, Pathfinder moved a lot in the sea conditions, making the time between swims challenging in its own right. Shown below is Captain Hartley briefing members of our team on what to expect when we embark on our great adventure in just a few short hours.



Ellis, Indie, Dom, and our Pilot Eric (Left to Right)

Just prior to meeting with our Pilot, Alison and I enjoyed an “afternoon tea” at Mr White’s Chop House in a beautiful 19th century building at Dover Harbor. Thinking we were having a “snack”, we ended up relying on the “tea” as our pre-race carbo-load. An unusual, yet surprisingly effective strategy. Then, just a few hours later we were on board Pathfinder and underway at 0330, Friday morning, July 8, 2022.

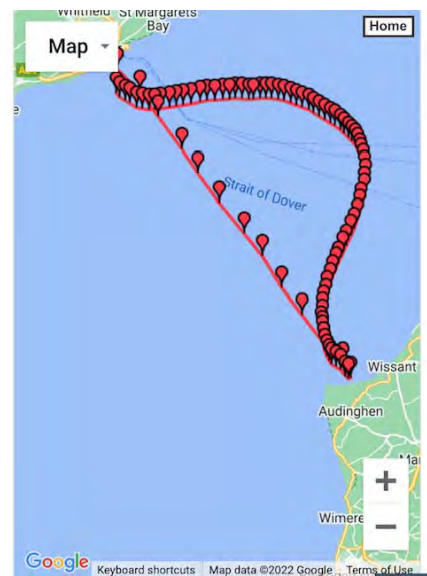


Carbo loading at Afternoon Tea.

Ellis, Indie, Chantal, and Dom

And thus began our 13 hour and 38-minute adventure across the English Channel. Conditions were good, albeit challenging. About four hours and one complete rotation of swimmers into the day, the Pilot shared with us that the tidal current was unusually strong, more like a Spring than the Neap tide we had expected. We were being swept easterly at a rate that could cause us to stray into the prohibited Dover-Calais Ferry area, which would force us to abandon the swim. The solution was to swim hard and crab into the current to slow our drift east. We did just that for the next four hours,

arresting our eastward drift just enough to stay out of the ferry lane when the tide finally turned and started helping us regain lost territory. Coincident with the stronger than expected tidal current was a stronger than expected westerly wind, which whipped up a healthy chop and at first exacerbated our easterly drift, but then slowed our westerly drift once the tide changed, likely helping us land on the beautiful French beaches near Cap Gris Nez.



As can be seen on the charts, while the straight-line distance across the channel is right at 21 nautical miles (39 Kilometers), we clearly took the scenic route as can be seen from the GPS track. It helped that we made the crossing in one tidal cycle, as another easterly shift would have been problematic at the end of our swim.

We continued to cycle through our lineup, with Dom and Chantal facing ever more challenging sea conditions as we swam through the day.



Dom just finishing a swim



Chantal getting us close to France

After each swimmer had swum three times, we found ourselves within about three miles (5 Kilometers) of our destination. My fourth and final swim got us close enough for our most photogenic team member, Indie, to land the swim at 5:38 pm local time, and serve as the Alexa's Atlantic Alliance ambassador to France.

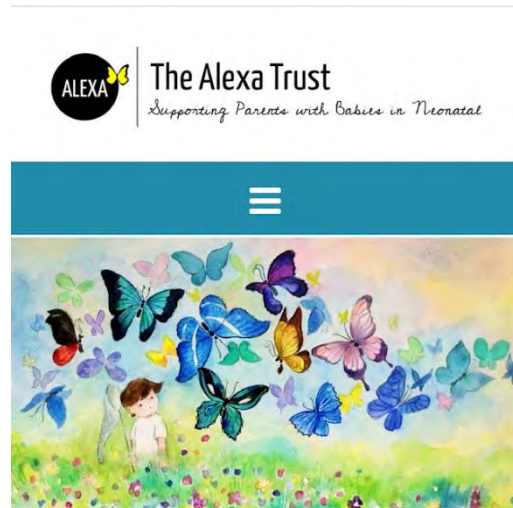


Mussel beds prevented Pathfinder from following Indie in closer to the beach, so the tender was launched to support her final push to France.

We were an extremely successful team with no weak spots. We were all strong swimmers and were blessed with an indefatigable photographer, Alison, a delightfully supportive CSA Observer, and an extraordinarily capable pilot. As I thought about what was so special about this team I had an epiphany. Each of us loved to swim and was motivated by the doing, not the prize at the end. It was the doing, not the did that we each treasured, resulting in smiles and attitudes that could not help but positively influence the entire experience.

Finally, being coached and mentored by Howard James, himself a three-time English Channel swimmer and record holder; and supporting he and his wife Imelda's wonderful charity "The Alexa Trust", a UK charity set up in memory of Alexa James, a beautiful baby girl born prematurely in 2015 who sadly lost her battle for life. This charity supports parents with babies in neonatal care. For those of my friends who have supported me and The Alexa Trust, thank you. For anyone who may still want to contribute, a link to their web page is provided below.

<https://thealexatrust.org/>



Thanks for following Alison and my great adventure.