

TRIUMPH

August 31, Marina Hemingway, Havana –
September 2, 2013, Smathers Beach, Key West, FL
110.86 statute miles, point to point, shore to shore
52hrs, 54mins, 18secs

Essential Crew:

Head Handler:	Bonnie Stoll
Handlers:	Pauline Berry Lois Ann Porter
Navigator:	John Bartlett
Ops Chief:	John Berry
Captain Shark Team:	Niko Gazalle
Med Team:	Univ of Miami ER docs
Social Media:	Candace Hogan
Voyager Captain:	Dee Brady
Voyager Driver:	Nancy Jordan
Chief Kayak Team:	Buco Pantelis
Other Kayaker:	Mike Devlin
Jellyfish Safety:	Dr. Angel Yanagihara
Independent Observers:	Janet Hinkle Roger McVeigh

The fifth time was the charm. Perhaps it's a life lesson to all of us. If you get knocked down, over and over, and you have the tenacity to continue to get back up and try again, you will inevitably prevail and make it to the other shore.

Every expedition on planet earth comes home, successful or not, with new knowledge. After four attempts to cross this epic ocean, our team had new knowledge, new protocols, we hoped would give us a better chance of finally succeeding.

- 1) I had a prosthesis specialist in Pasadena, CA, Dr. Stefan Knauss, render me a silicone mask, to protect my lips and nose and face, where I was stung again in 2012 and couldn't take another chance of having any square inch of my skin exposed. A wisp of only one box tentacle, sweeping across the lips, can spark the Irukandji Syndrome as much as swimming into a swarm and having tentacles wrapped around the biceps, the forearms, the back, as happened to me September, 2011.

It took Dr. Knauss and I nine months, prototype after prototype, to come up with a mask with a retainer hot waxed on the interior, for me to bite into and allow me to open and close the mouth slit. It was difficult to swim in, especially with any wave action. Bonnie witnessed me try to use it in St. Maarten training and, although she applauded my drive to solve the box exposure, she remained unconvinced. I took in a lot of sea water, was therefore sick, and also had trouble getting enough oxygen through that small mouth opening. But I persisted and might not have come back for a fifth attempt without that extra level of protection.

(NOTE: The box stings wind up sensitizing an individual, as opposed to immunizing. In other words, I was lucky to live through those massive stings in 2011. After more stings in 2012, even a minor sting now might have a fatal effect.)

- 2) The FINIS stinger suit and the latex surgeon's gloves and booties I used in the 2012 attempt were effective, but I was still stung on the lips and on the ankles and wrists. The face would this time be protected by the mask, even though it was tough to swim with on a flat surface, extremely difficult with any wave action. And Bonnie and I decided to wrap duct tape around the ankles and wrists, the exposed skin area between the suit and the booties and the gloves. I can say that treading water with one limb above water, for Bonnie to dab the skin to dry it and then wrap it with the duct tape so that all skin was covered, was exponentially more tiring than swimming. If you've played water polo, you know it takes strength to kick to keep one arm above the surface. Well, imagine what effort it takes to keep one *leg* up in the air, not propped up on the boat, not held on Bonnie's shoulder but free standing in the air so that Bonnie could do the wrapping.

(NOTE Rule #8.6 of the Florida Straits Open Water Swimming Association:

"Crew members shall take care to not support, touch, propel, or push the swimmers during the swim at any point along the course as long as there is not a rescue or emergency. However, if equipment is used and cannot be put on by the swimmer, then the crew can assist taking care not to propel the swimmer forward.")

- 3) John Bartlett had the curiosity and the initiative to pursue a solution to the circular eddies. He found that the outside counterclockwise arcs of the eddies measure at a warmer temperature than the Stream itself. He spent countless hours going out during our training months earlier in the year, developing his system of throwing in random thermometers to test the temps and then to test the eddies. He did this on the way over to Cuba as well. Then during the 2013 swim itself, he would send a zodiac boat up ahead and have one of our crew do some temperature testing, trying to locate the eddies. I can't say we were terribly accurate in locating them during the swim itself, but to have a new protocol, an attempt to control one of the potential barriers out there, was encouraging to our team.

It was the morning of Saturday, August 31, 2013, that I leaped off the rocks at Marina Hemingway and swam away from the Cuba shore for the fifth time. At our crew meeting the day before, Bonnie reiterated the basic rules, that I was never to be touched. And she called out to the shark divers each time they would enter the water to scout around under me, not to touch me at any time. And she reiterated that warning to them when they had to swim off with me during storm protocol away from Voyager.

The kayakers and the crew closest to me on Voyager were also very careful never to touch me, nor for me to touch the boats. If there was ever a brushing of a hand by the kayak or Voyager, it was totally unintentional and fleeting.

For instance, during the second night, the night of August 1, I was drifting far off to the right, sometimes as much as 100 meters. Bonnie was frustrated that I was swimming out to the right and back toward Voyager so many times that I was literally putting in extra unnecessary miles going east and west, instead of due north. And she and the divers were concerned that they couldn't patrol for my safety and act accordingly, when I was so far from Voyager.

At one point, having discussed his plan with Bonnie, our Chief Kayak Safety paddler Buco Pantelis parked his kayak to my right and refused to budge as I started drifting to the right. I banged my hand

on his hull and was mad at him for letting me hit my hand. Bonnie and I had trained the kayakers, both in training and on the swims themselves, to be careful to steer away from me. I could break a hand if I hit the boat or one of their paddles hard. But Buco purposefully put his kayak in a position so that I could not swim to the right. I did touch that kayak hull but it was an inadvertent, quick, passing touch. I never held onto either of the kayaks. And I never held onto Voyager. I was careful to tread a few feet away from the low transom and Bonnie was careful to warn me away if a wave or my semi-delirium brought me too close to the boat.

That first daylight swim of Saturday, August 31, 2013, went very well. I was strong and happy, singing my songs. Our feeding stops were very short. John Bartlett came out of his navigation cabin several times with his thumbs up, signaling he was encouraged by the direction of the Stream current. We had never, for one minute on the previous four attempts, had such a favorable Gulf Stream axis, perhaps further fodder for the ethic of getting back and trying again when you fail. Perhaps the person who was willing to challenge this epic ocean five times deserved a little luck.

That first night was tough. The wind escalated. Bonnie told me several crew members were seasick. The mask was on one hand a lifesaver of an

innovation. But through the heavy chop that night, the mask kept me from judging just when to take a breath and avoid a wave, and the narrow slit of the mouth made for grabbing sips of oxygen difficult. I took in several slaps/walls of salt water and vomited into the mask several times. It wasn't easy for me, the finger tips now a bit numb, to find the edge of the silicone at the neck, to pull up the mask, clean it out, and get it back on.

The next day, Sunday, Sept 1, gave us still pretty rough seas, but just after dawn, I got the okay from Angel and Bonnie to take off the mask, suit, gloves and booties. Bonnie and her Handler team worked all day to get me rehydrated and boost the calorie intake, from losing so much during that difficult night.

As the night approached, I was having true trouble imagining putting that mask back on. The interior of my mouth was cut up pretty badly, in part from the normal effects of salt water exposure, but the edges of the retainer built into the mask, much as Dr. Knauss and I had worded to smooth those down, had cut into the gums and the edges of the tongue. Angel did a dive survey before dusk and also consulted all her charts. She said exposure to the box would be slightly less risky this night. She definitely counseled the suit, gloves and booties

again but thought I would be okay without the mask. The relief was mammoth.

Angel did approach me, Bonnie and crew observing from close by on Voyager, both of us treading and careful for her not to hold me up in any way, and she smeared her green gel all over my face. I was reluctant, not wanting that grease on my goggles. My vision was already limited. And I didn't want that grease to be on my hands as I would need to pull down my cap as it rose up every now and then. And, in fact, it made me a bit crazy the rest of the way that my hands were covered with that gel, my goggles had a thick smear over the lenses, and my cap was just about impossible for me to pull down any longer. But Angel is the boss when it comes to box protection so Bonnie and I allowed Angel to smear the gel across my lips, nose and face.

That was a long night, Sunday night. I started hallucinating freely. I started swimming very far off to the right. There was a storm and we once again went into the storm protocol of my swimming off with Niko and Jason, our two lead shark divers this time out.

I was also cold. While swimming, I could produce enough of a metabolic rate to feel warm enough, but while treading water for food or drink, I would shiver uncontrollably. Bonnie pushed me to regain focus and a strong attitude. She made an executive decision and went against our steadfast rules of

nobody ever telling me where we are, how close we might be to the Florida shore. Our view is that, unless you can see the palm trees with your own eyes, anything might still happen to keep you from getting there.

Bonnie asked me to stop, look forward toward the horizon and tell me what I saw. I saw black on black, nothing. She pressed me. After a bit I could make out a thin white line. I was encouraged. It was the sunrise seeping up. I would feel the warmth of the sun soon. I felt the hope that the sunrise brings us. Bonnie said: "It's better than the sun. Those are the lights of Key West."

Those lights turned out to be a long way away still. But Bonnie's instincts had been right. My strength of both body and mind lifted a huge degree. We got back to work. Shark patrol. Jellyfish watch (in broad daylight just a few hours later, Angel actually scooped up a box jelly). Kayak formation.

Bonnie gave me another huge lift. She told me during one feeding that I would never have to put the jellyfish suit or mask on again. Never. I was confused, thinking she meant we weren't going to be in jellyfish trouble if we went into a third night. But I caught on to what she was telling me. We were going to reach the shore before the third night.

Sure enough, I started to see helicopters and boats. I kept my head down and kept stroking. With word that we were perhaps two hours from shore, I asked John Bartlett to bring the crew on their vessels close to me. My words were slurred, from the abrasions inside the mouth. I tread water in front of their semi-circle, all of them up at the bows, listening, some crying. And I told them:

"I guess I'm going to stumble onto that shore pretty soon. And I guess somebody is going to take my picture. But don't any of you forget, my team, that we did this *together*. We refused to give up. And we made history *together*."

But I didn't fully take it in, didn't truly believe it, and kept somehow pressing toward the shore, until I was in knee-deep water. I tried to stand up and walk but my sea legs were wobbly. Our Ops Chief John Berry yelled for me to keep swimming, instead of trying to walk. I went back down and swam in the very shallow waters, sometimes my hands touching the sand. I finally stood and took unbalanced steps, Bonnie walking backwards right in front of me, her hands stretched wide, guiding me to walk toward her and toward solid ground, as we had planned, to the point where "no sea water remained". All our crew had gotten to shore at this point and, along with local police and many local citizens, had formed two lines, linking arms, all calling out to the crowd NOT TO TOUCH ME, as I swam and then walked in between their corridor. At Bonnie's signal

that we were indeed on terra firma, I fell into her arms and into the crowd's inspired cheers, the official clock stopping at:

52hrs, 54mins, 18secs.

John Bartlett later entered the final distance, precise GPS measurement from point to point, Marina Hemingway boulders of my leap to Key West Smathers Beach where I left all sea water behind, as 110.86 miles.