

Swimming for Life

AT DAWN ON SUNDAY, JULY 13, after a three-day delay to wait out stormy weather and high winds, Sydney actuary Kaise Stephan stepped into the waters off Shakespeare Beach in Dover, England. His goal—to swim the English Channel.

Covering 35 kilometers (21.7 miles), the Channel crossing is considered one of the world's toughest marathon swims. Before embarking on his quest of a lifetime, Stephan had swum just six kilometers in the open. It took more than 4,500 kilometers of training over two and a half year years to prepare for what he calls the longest, most physically demanding, day of his life.



Stephan's inspiration was his teenage cousin Mark, who was battling leukemia. Stephan searched for a way to help other kids survive—as Mark has done. Because Stephan swam at regional and state levels in Australia as a teenager and competed in water polo while in college, swimming was an obvious choice. He formed Channel Crossing for Life, a fundraising initiative to support the oncology unit of the Children's Hospital in Westmead, Australia.

In a recent interview with *Contingencies*, Stephan discussed his channel crossing and the motivation that helped him during the actual swim and the hours of training and preparation that preceded it.

Describe the swim. What were your thoughts over the course of that long day?

When I got the confirmation phone call from Andy King, the boat pilot, at 8 p.m. the night before, I set my alarm clock for 3 a.m. for a 5 a.m. swim start time. But I was too excited to sleep. In the morning, I had my last breakfast before the swim: six Weetbix (the Australian version of shredded wheat). I was surprised at how calm I was. Perhaps it was all the training and the help from all around me that gave me extra strength.

KAISE STEPHAN is a Sydney-based appointed actuary with Munich Reinsurance Group in Australasia. For more details and pictures of his training regimen and channel swim, go to www.channelcrossingforlife.com.

I met Andy at 4:30, and he took me and the crew to Shakespeare Beach by boat. The nerves started to set in. This was an expected reaction as I considered what I was planning to put my body and mind through over the next 15 hours. As I began to stretch and got greased up with channel grease, I didn't talk much, trying to maintain full focus.

When we reached the beach, I jumped off the side of the boat and swam to the beach to await the boat horn that would signal my start. I was greeted by my family on the beach, and all I could say was "Thanks" (and in my mind, "It was nice to have known you.").

The boat horn sounded clearly, and in I went. I left England just as the sun was rising. I could see the white cliffs of Dover, stating their beautiful presence behind me. The weather was great, thanks to God for that.

The white cliffs fell away as I came across the first shipping lane on the U.K. side, massive tankers (miniature floating cities, really) creating four- to five-meter waves! In the middle of the channel, I saw some jellyfish under the surface, but I didn't come into contact with any. (Later, I read that Portuguese man-of-war are all around the U.K. beaches.) It was getting difficult then as I did not see land either way at that stage.

What kept you going?

All the heartfelt text messages I received before starting helped me keep up my endurance during the swim, as did Daniel Esposito, my volunteer coach, who kept checking on how I was coping with the 15-degrees Celsius (59-degrees Fahrenheit) water temperature. My young support swimmer Ryan Aniley, who was allowed to hop in every second hour to pace me, was much-needed company.

When I started to see more ships, I knew I was nearing the French coast. Half an hour later, I actually saw the coast,



which was a boost. But an hour later (at the nine-hour mark), the coast didn't look any closer, which was a big downer as I was very tired, cold, hungry, and feeling the weight of my effort. Fortunately, I received a message from my wife and my 10-month-old, delivered to me by my sister, who was on the support boat. I had asked that no messages be relayed while I was swimming. But this one thankfully got through. The message was that my son was saying, "Baba go, Baba go." My coach says that after this I swam faster than I had at any other point in the swim and that my newfound energy and speed continued for two hours.

When I was one to two kilometers away, I started to be able to make out objects on the beach. My coach told me that if I wanted to finish, it was there for the taking and totally up to me.

My arms and legs were still moving, and, amazingly, not sore. But I was very tired. When I saw the seafloor, it began to hit me that two and a half years of training was coming to an end. After more than 12 hours in the water, it was emotional to see ground again. The ground got closer, and I touched the bottom, sand filtering through my fingers. This was it, I thought to myself: All I have to do is walk, or even

crawl, onto the beach. I tried to walk but fell two times because my legs were wobbly. I stood up again and managed to walk onto Cap Gris Nez beach, surprising some solitary beachgoers who had no idea where I had come from. When they realized, there were handshakes all around, the tooting of the horn on the pilot boat that accompanied me across the channel, and my own celebration. I could lift up my arms, but after 12 hours and 34 minutes of continuous swimming, I wasn't able to jump up and down. It was 6 p.m., and I was in France on the eve of Bastille Day.

What were you thinking and feeling once the swim was over?

First, I had to swim back to the boat, 200 meters away, because it couldn't moor on the beach. The last thing I wanted to do, after swimming 45 to 50 kilometers, was swim 200 meters more. A raft was deployed

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to the shore, and my companions on the pilot boat handed over an Australian flag that had been flown over the Australian Parliament building on June 4 and then given to Channel Crossing for Life. That was an amazing moment for me and all involved. I was so exhausted, yet so exhilarated!

I was quickly shuttled onboard the pilot boat and given a warm blanket and some hot soup. Then I sat with my head in my hands trying to absorb the moment.

Were there any unexpected difficulties or problems?

Yes, English Channel water is saltier than Australian seawater, and the osmosis (i.e., water loss through my skin) was much more than I expected when planning my nutrition. In the first six to eight hours, I was dehydrating. I realized this around the eighth hour and told my feeder that we should adapt my feeds so that I got more water. I swam faster in the second half compared to the first.

I also couldn't have fathomed how enormous the shipping freights are, with 7,000 containers loaded on them. One got within 100 to 150 meters of me, creating huge waves.

Although 12½ hours of swimming is a massive stretch, I was prepared for up to 15 hours or more, so I was extremely happy with the timing.

Did the weather cause any difficulties?

The weather on the day was so great, I couldn't have asked for anything more. The winds were down, the sun was up, and the tides weren't too bad. The wind picked up later on in the swim, but it was manageable.

How did it compare to similar-length swims in Australia?

I had managed an equal distance in an open-water test swim in Sydney, but I knew that in the channel I'd have to push hard early to take advantage of the tides to reach north of Cap Gris Nez. It was technically more demanding than all the other swims I experienced because I knew I had to be at a particular point, a buoy near the French coast, when the tide turned due south. This would set me up to go with the flow into Cap Gris Nez rather than fight against it—or worse, extend the swim for another six hours until the tide turned again.

Why did you decide to undertake the swim?

I was inspired by my cousin Mark's experience with leukemia at the age of 12 (he is now 15). After seeing him and other children in his situation, I wanted to raise funds for cancer research.

What does Mark think of your efforts?

He thinks the world of it. He could not believe that I would go to such an effort in support of treatment for juvenile cancer. He actually stayed in Dover while I swam, eagerly receiving updates, and met me at the dock when I arrived back in Dover harbor. He was relieved that I was OK, safe and sound.

How much money have you raised so far?

Around \$135,000 Australian, perhaps more once you add in

double-ups from some people. A few work colleagues from Munich Re and the company itself decided to donate and then double the donation if I made it across. This gave me an additional incentive to keep going during the swim.

Who have been your main supporters?

There were so many: my wife, mum, dad, brother, and sister; God; my coach, Daniel Esposito, and support swimmer, Ryan Aniley; the Channel Crossing for Life fundraising committee; and Liz Herbert, who provided media and public relations assistance in Australia. Of course, I received huge support from the actuarial community, including the Australian Institute of Actuaries. In the U.S., the Academy has also been a source of support. I understand from the hospital that donations have been coming in from all around the world, including the United States.

Did you employ any skills that you have learned as an actuary to help you in

planning the swim or while swimming?

Absolutely. I had to research the swim, understand the risks (the factors that could lead to a possible failure), and prepare myself against each. I tried to understand each uncertainty and reduce those uncertainties.

I also needed to continually monitor myself physically and mentally to ensure good levels of hydration, energy from the feeds, and positive thinking. If any of these started to flag, I needed to alter a factor or aspect and communicate this to my support crew onboard the boat in order to maintain a relatively good level of function (a control cycle operating well in the middle of the English Channel!).

It was as much an intellectual challenge as a physical one. Toward the end of the swim, the intellectual aspect grew more difficult and required mental toughness. (Not unlike the actuarial qualification process and exams!)

What were your training hours leading up to the swim?

Horrendous. At one point, I took a week off from work and spent 35 to 40 hours in the water swimming 90 kilometers. At the end of the week, I was very glad to be going back to work.

How difficult was it to train and continue to work full time?

It was challenging. I got used to swimming five kilometers in morning. I wasn't too tired in the morning. But lunchtime and afternoon swims were more difficult.

My schedule needed to be very fluid to cope with changes in demands from both work and training. I was reporting to two bosses—except one of them was a tough (and excellent) swimming coach.

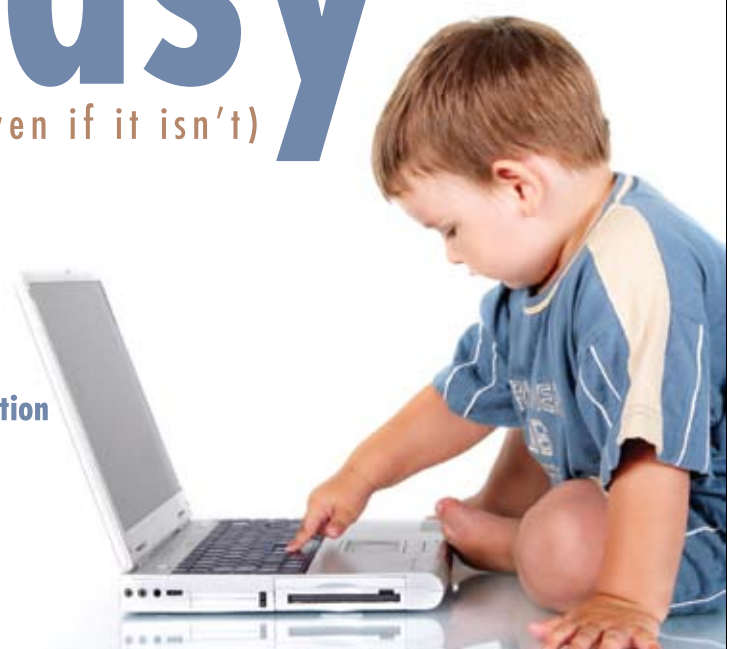
What's next?

I need to rest. And catch up on family time. But while my challenge is over, for thousands of kids fighting cancer, the battle goes on. If you haven't yet made one, donations are still being accepted at www.channelcrossingforlife.com.

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