

PREAMBLE

The RTAI (Round Trip Angel Island) starts in Aquatic Park, on the sand in front of SERC and the Dolphin Club; this is near Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco, just west of Fisherman's Wharf.



From the sand to the exit of Aquatic Park is a .2-mile swim. Then the route heads a little west of north up to Point Stuart on the west side of Angel Island. It continues around Angel Island in a clockwise direction, and then returns to the Aquatic Park entrance. From that point on, the escort boat is not allowed to go into Aquatic Park, so the swimmer finishes that last .2-mile to get to the sand where he started. The observer has visual contact on the swimmer, and watches as the swimmer walks onto the sand, and

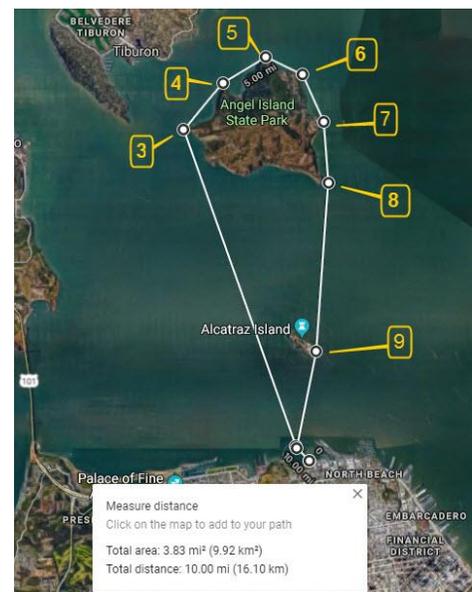
the swim concludes.

Then the swimmer gets back into the water, and re-swims that same .2-mile distance to get to the exit of Aquatic Park, to rejoin the escort.

Thus the RTAI swim is more or less bookended by traversing this short stretch of water in Aquatic Park. Much transpired between these bookends...

PLANNING (or Eyes Wide Shut)

I put a fair amount of thought into how this swim would be achieved, relying heavily on Evan Morrison's experience (he has swum it himself, and he has aided in the planning and supporting of 3-4 other RTAI swims). I identified my swim route with 11 waypoints identifying 10 idealized line segments that defined this 10.0 (statute) mile swim. I reviewed the predicted times of the maximum ebb and flood flows; I deconstructed the swim into ten minor legs and five major legs; I estimated my anticipated pace during these legs. I relied on my boat captains (Bryan Temmermand and Sylvia Lacock of Pacific Open Water Swim Company) to provide best estimates for shipping traffic during my swim. I expected to have a rich empirical data set of what might actually go on, because 15-year-old Angel More was set to jump at 3:30 am on the day before my intended swim; I would learn a lot from her experience.



I was a jolly planner, ciphering and measuring, projecting my pace in different theoretical conditions. I came up with a matrix that estimated my time down to the minute, as I would hit the five milestones that I'd gotten to know on a first-name basis (Point Stuart, Point Campbell, Point Blunt Rock, East of Alcatraz, Aquatic Park). My math told me I'd do this swim in 5 hours and 58 minutes. I added 32 minutes to this for contingencies, and told myself "okay this is a 6.5-hour swim, or possibly up to a 7-hour swim".

point	name	cumulative distance	notes	Projected Real Time	Leg Distance (miles)	Speed (mph)	Leg Duration (h:mm)
1	start	0.0		4:09 AM			
2	exit AP	0.2	(AP = Aquatic Park)				
3	pt stuart	4.0	Enter Raccoon Straits	6:26 AM	4.0	1.75	2:17
4	pt lone	4.7					
5	pt. campbell (northernmost point)	5.2	Exiting Raccoon Straits	6:56 AM	1.2	2.40	0:30
6	pt simpton	5.6	Fully in lee of flood				
7	quarry pt	6.2	Fully in lee of flood				
8	pt blunt rock	6.9	Exit lee of flood	7:59 AM	1.7	1.60	1:03
9	east of alcatraz	8.8	East of Alcatraz	9:15 AM	1.9	1.50	1:16
10	enter AP	9.8					
11	finish	10.0	Swim End	10:07 AM	1.2	1.40	0:51
Totals:				5:58	10		5:58

MY EYES OPEN



All was well with this elegantly choreographed plan until Saturday morning, when I did not see Angel's swim being tracked. Did the SPOT device fail? Did she get sick? Was she late in starting? I had this text exchange with Evan.

"Fog"--Evan's one word text threw me off balance. I had not entertained the thought of fog inserting itself into my planned swim. And yet there had been so much thick fog encountered before Angel was to start her swim, that the swim was called off. I recall a brief sensation, an inkling, that my well-laid swim plans could possibly be at odds with the less-than-perfect laboratory called The San Francisco Bay.

I ended up going to sleep in a hotel near Sausalito, not knowing whether my swim would happen or not (would the fog descend in the wee hours again?). Davis (my crew chief) and I met Sylvia and Bryan at their boat (a 32' Cobalt, *Dynamic Duo*) at the Sausalito Marina very early on Sunday morning, and set off, still not knowing if the swim would take place. Once we cleared Richardson Bay and entered the main body of the San Francisco Bay, we saw that the fog was minimal: the swim would take place.

I recall hearing co-captain Bryan, having watched a stationary buoy that we motored past, musing to himself “Hmmm..., it seems like the flood tide is a little early....”.

This remark, added to Evan’s “fog” text, now had my brain roiling. It was happening....again....

I was going to be called upon, as I have been in every swim I’ve performed, to relearn a basic fact of marathon swimming—namely that you must surrender to what comes, else you are opening the door (extra-wide) for the unwanted interlopers: misery, exasperation, self-doubt, irritability, resistance, second guessing....

THE NATURE OF WATER (The Uneasy Truce)

I make a deal with the water every time I perform a marathon swim. Our deal is something along these lines: I will bring my best intentions to water’s edge; I will be trained, accompanied by a solid boat and captain, and supported by a loyal and steadfast crew chief. My stomach will be ironclad; I must have confidence in my feeding plan, and in my body’s ability to perform, and in my mind’s compartmentalizing talent.

The Water has its own conditions. The Water is a generous host, and freely provides the gift of Buoyancy to me, without which the-sport-that-chose-me could not exist. So, thanks for that, Water. However, having extended this gift freely, there is treachery in the Water.

Water as Antibiotic. I don’t mean the word from the 1950’s referring to various chemical substances produced by micro-organisms used to treat infectious diseases. No, I mean an earlier definition. “Anti” as in “against” or “opposite of”. And “biotikos” as “pertaining to life” or “fit for life”. So, “antibiotic” as “doubting the possibility of life in a particular environment”. We humans are warm-blooded mammals; we are air-breathing and terrestrial. Water is perilous; it can quickly suffocate us, and given time, cold water will extract the life from a human being.

This is the nefarious side of Water: it extends its gift of Buoyancy, pulling you into it, and then it surrounds you with a Coldness that will eventually prevail over you. Even that gift of Buoyancy is suspect. Slight disturbances (fatigue, chop, wake, a saltless water body, a briefly mis-behaved epiglottis, too much salt water in your lungs, a bump on the head) could tip the Bouyancy equation against you, and could take you from the surface. And then, quickly and thoughtlessly, the water will suffocate you.

ADVERSITIES APLENTY

In RTAI, there were many variables at play, unlike any swim I have undertaken. There were ample opportunities for this body of water to obstruct and (possibly) defeat me.

Did the folks on the boat see my struggles? Did they realize that I nearly “cracked” on three different occasions during this swim? Three times on this swim I directly confronted immediate failure. I kept it to myself as best I could, but this swim slowly unhinged me, far more than any other swim I’ve undertaken. I starkly saw my limitations and the likelihood of not completing the swim. Those three *I-might-fail-this-time* events are captured in “**#4 The Little Fishies**”, “**#6 Incident at Point Blunt Rock**” and “**#9 I’m gonna tap out....**”.

1. "Hey, this water is f*in' cold!"**

Before the swim, I was very concerned about the cold water, but as it turned out, I generally handled this okay. But a nearly naked body inhabiting water that is 57-58 degrees F for nearly ten hours certainly does get whittled down by the temperature. And that compromised condition allows for situations where lesser adversities may be amplified.

2. "Angel, are you out there?"

I was counting on a wealth of current information being gathered by Bryan, Sylvia, and Evan during Angel More's RTAI swim the day before my swim. That was going to inform my swim and, I felt, give us an edge to help tip the scales for my swim's success. Alas, Angel never swam. I'd hoped to be in full knowledge of a recent and successful swim on the same route I'd be undertaking. This anticipated information never materialized, due to a dense fog preventing Angel from even starting her swim.

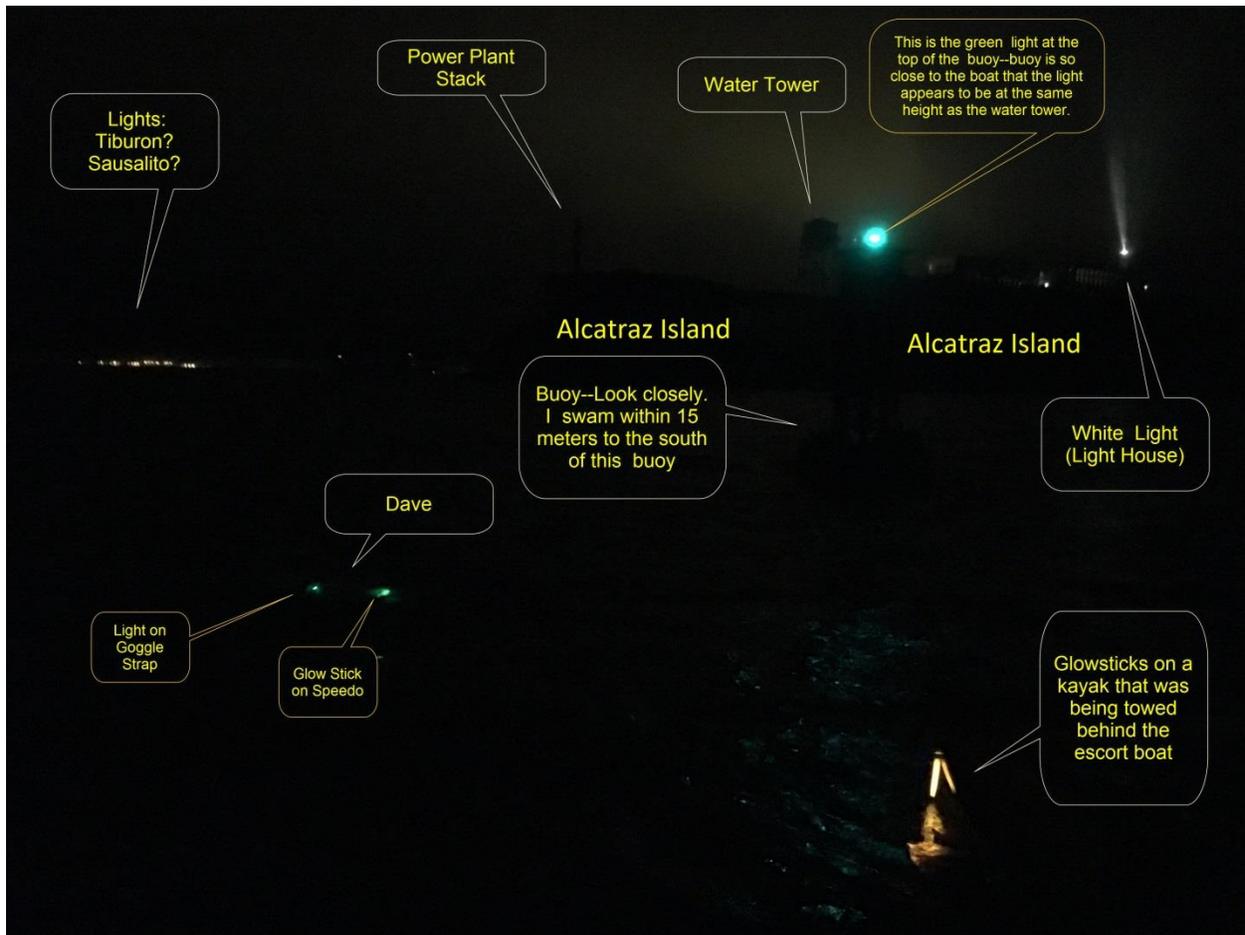
3. "It's dark, and a little eerie out here"

I've swum at night many times; it's always a little weirder to do this in the ocean than in a lake. Normally I have a paddleboarder with me, and this gives me some immediate company. But in the complex conditions of the San Francisco Bay, a paddleboarder would just add another moving part, which might further complicate matters. So I was on my own, feeling kind of isolated, but at the same time there was surely a beauty to it...

Due to tides and anticipated ships coming through the shipping channels, I jumped at 4:09 am, so the first three hours occurred in darkness. By 5:00 am, Alcatraz Island was off of my right side; it is pretty lit up at night.



Here's a picture of us slipping past Alcatraz Island.



4. The Little Fishies

It was still dark when we were closing in on Angel Island. There was a period of about fifteen minutes in which I felt like I was getting “tapped” or “pinged” by small (2-3 inch) fish. This might have happened 6-8 times, and it was unnerving; it drew my attention to that which was beneath me.

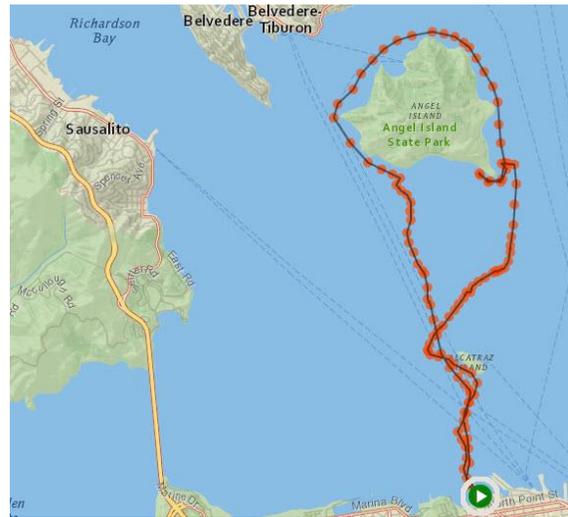
I swam off the starboard side of the boat; sometimes I was ahead of the boat, and sometimes I was behind it. There was a time when I believe I was as much as 30 yards behind the boat, and I took a couple of those “pings” from the small fish. And when I felt them, and I was quite far behind the boat, and it was dark, my attention brimmed with thoughts of creatures that might be underneath me. My mind was suddenly electrified, and for a long minute I felt panic flashing and jumping through my body. I felt extremely isolated and vulnerable; I felt that there was only myself to get through this situation—the boat was too far away. I’m not sure, but somehow I “kept my shit together”, and gradually I pulled up closer to the starboard side of the boat. The moment passed with no one realizing that I’d taken a frightening mental detour for 3-4 minutes; I felt composed again – the panic was just a fleeting experience.

5. "I don't wanna crab"

We selected a neap tide for the swim—this is when the moon is in the vicinity of a first quarter or last quarter phase, and so the moon is less influential on the movement of tides. Thus, the volume of water movement during neap tides is minimized, so ebb and flood tides are not extreme, and a swim route is less affected by tidal currents.

Nonetheless, I had to swim through two tidal cycles (a flood—e.g. water coming into the bay; and an ebb—e.g. water moving out of the bay). In planning for this swim, there is no perfect meshing of the timing of the swim with the timing of the tides; the best you can do is hedge your bets and try to minimize, through timing, the tidal flow's effect on your swim.

A quick look at the actual track of my swim, pictured to the right, should deeply disturb a marathon swimmer. It is obvious that on my way north to Angel Island, I was being pushed inland by the growing flood tide. So I had to crab—meaning that often I was swimming in a northwesterly direction, towards



Sausalito, or even further to the west, simply to curtail the flood tide's influence on my goal of the west side of Angel Island. Much energy was spent crabbing. Ideally the swimmer spends his not-unlimited energy supply moving towards his goal, rather than diverting a portion of his energy on simply counteracting the movement of the water. The same problem occurred on my return from Angel Island. The route above shows that when I was about halfway to Alcatraz Island, I encountered the ebb tide, and it was pushing me west towards Golden Gate Bridge. This meant I had to swim in a nearly eastward direction, when my intended goal was to the south.

6. Incident at Point Blunt Rock

I completed the swim up to Angel Island, and navigated the west, north, and east sides of the island, and was at Point Blunt Rock. I had covered 7 miles in five hours; this was very slow for me—I had been battling currents for much of my swim. (I had long ago abandoned my projected swim duration of 5:58.) But now I had 3 miles left, and the swim would be complete. I was feeling pretty confident, happily unaware of how I would be spending the next 4 hours and 47 minutes.



Photo by Davis Best

Shortly before I was to leave Point Blunt Rock, Vessel Traffic hailed my captains, and let them know that a large cargo vessel was at the Golden Gate Bridge, and would soon be coming through the Deep-Water Shipping Lane—I would have to wait for it to pass. What was originally described as a 15-minute delay ultimately became a 55-minute delay. During this time, I had no choice but to swim in circles around the

boat, trying to keep warm, biding my time. After a half hour of circles, swimming with no real purpose, sometimes breast-stroking, my body began to cool off. I lost my drive; I felt the cold infiltrate me—it got into my torso, and “into my head”. I started shivering while I continued to swim my meaningless circles; eventually my teeth were chattering. I feared that I would not recover from this cooling off; I felt a relief that the swim would soon end.



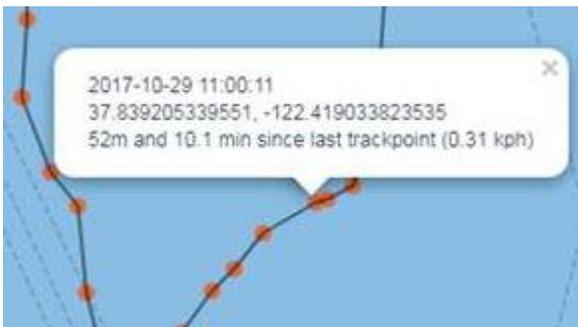
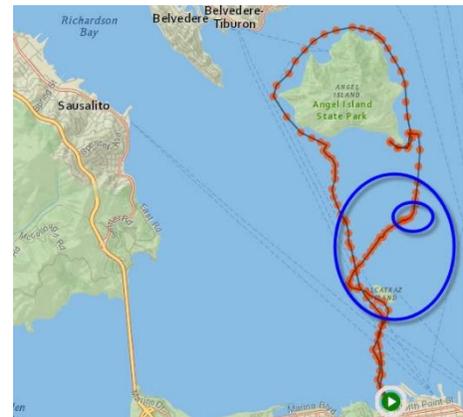
Photo by Evan Morrison

But...then we got a call from Vessel Traffic, and we saw the cargo ship plowing east through the water, about a mile from us, approaching Alcatraz Island. The swim resumed; I was swimming with a purpose again, and my body recovered so that I was no longer shivering, and the cold receded to my extremities. But this was a near brush with failure—I had gotten close to a deficit of cold from which I would not have been able to recover. This picture shows the ship that nearly ended my swim. The ship is much closer than

Alcatraz Island, so its 700 foot length makes it seem to be about the same size as Alcatraz Island, to the left and in the background.

7. “Please make it stop”

When the ebb slammed me midway back to Alcatraz Island, it felt as though for nearly two hours I was more or less swimming in place. My intended route was to head south, back to San Francisco, with the island off of my right shoulder. After an hour or so, with the ebb still steaming along, it was decided that we should relent regarding this, and set a new goal—namely trying to take cover from the ebb by getting behind (to the west side) Alcatraz, and thus on the lee side of the island. Later my crew chief, Davis, told me that Evan first articulated this route-altering suggestion, and I believe this decision salvaged my swim. I’m in a debt of gratitude to Evan for the route revision at this precarious time.



The horror, though, is shown to the left. There were some times when all my energies were spent counteracting the ebbing tide. See those two points; they are separated by 10.1 minutes in time, but only by 52 meters in distance, and I was swimming hard the whole time. Other pairs of points were 89 or 93 meters apart.

8. *“This is taking too long”*

One disservice I did to myself—and I should know better—especially in a swim with so many variables-- was to set a (mental) target swim duration of 6.5 to 7.0 hours. As that target duration was abandoned, I lost some heart and my exasperation grew. The first 7 miles of the swim took 5 hours, and the last 3 miles of the swim took 4 hours and 47 minutes.

9. *“I am gonna tap out at the next feeding”*

The crossing from Point Blunt Rock to Alcatraz Island started out well, but once the ebb hit us, it was very tough on me. After a lot of swimming in place, and eventually creeping over to the west side of Alcatraz, I was mentally, and nearly physically, spent. There was a buoy that I remember swimming next to, and it seemed like I just swam alongside it for some harshly long period of time. I was becoming increasingly exasperated and disoriented. I devised my exit strategy. I would give the boat a fair warning of my intent to end the swim, and then would show them that I was tough enough to announce the end of my swim, but still swim for thirty more minutes before calling it quits. As we approached Alcatraz, at a feeding, I told Davis, “I’m gonna tap out at the next feeding”. This all made sense to me at the time; I just wanted it all to end. I was ready to accept defeat.

At the next feeding, there was no mention of my quitting anymore; Davis said nothing as he got my feed to me; I said nothing about it; evidently, the swim was still on. In fact, it was only an hour and a half later that I successfully completed the swim. But there was a time there when I was ready to embrace the DNF (Did Not Finish), and just touch the boat and get the hell out of the water.

EPILOGUE

We ducked behind the lee of Alcatraz on the west side, and hugged the island, enjoying a reprieve from the ebb tide. We scooted south past Alcatraz Island, and then began the final push across the channel between Alcatraz Island and Aquatic Park. By that time the ebb was abating (and I believe, too, that the ebb is generally less prominent in that part of the bay), and we were able to cross that final mile with far less of a crabbing effort than we put out on the north side of Alcatraz. By the time I was halfway across, I could tell that I was going to complete the swim.

I swam the final .2 mile into Aquatic Park by myself, since boats are not allowed in entry. From the entrance to Aquatic Park the observer on the boat was able to see me walk out of the water to dry sand, and so officially record the swim. Then I re-entered the water, and swam back out through Aquatic Park to the boat.

This was a singular experience, one that I will hold closely. There was plenty of adversity, and the swim almost “cracked” me more than once. But I was able to prevail, and ultimately to experience a potent sense of accomplishment.

I remember hauling myself on the platform on the back of the boat; Davis sprayed warm water on me from a hose, while I just hunkered there; relieved, joyful, and spent.

I had endured much in the ten hours between my first and second swim from the sand to the exit from Aquatic Park. There was a discarding of the naivete that accompanied me at the start of this swim.

There was a stripping away of my preconceived expectations of what this swim would be. There were multiple encounters with myself. Ultimately there was a distilled and urgent need to confront and prevail over this swim.

Knowledge of my life disappeared, and my mind and body were focused only on this one task. For many hours, I was reduced--there was nothing else. I was no longer a 60 year old man, nor a husband, father, son, or brother. Not a worker, not a taxpayer, not an American citizen. I was fully adrift, like once, long ago, when I ate psilocybin mushrooms on a rafting trip on the San Juan River in Arizona in the late 1980's. And was wandering naked in the desert, in a thunderstorm, unmoored from any context or plot line connecting me with familiar landmarks.

Yet in this reduction, there was an accompanying expansion. Although the Past and the Future receded, the Present took on real shape, and I fully inhabited it. This deep habitation of the Present, as amplified by swimming, is a holy grail for swimmers. It is what (many of us) yearn for.

A friend of mine, [John Hampsey](#), bestowed this blessing on my swim when he presciently observed: "And you will sense the presence of the Divine [Salitter](#) in the Cerulean Sea, and All will be Well."

And hear this: [Peeling off the Layers](#), if you have Spotify. Else, click [here](#) for a YouTube version. I melded with this song during parts of my swim.

My aquatic life affords me these poignant moments, something that often eludes me on dry land. How can I take the deep nourishment of my aquatic life, and migrate it into attitudes and behaviors and states of consciousness in my terrestrial life? This is mostly a mystery.

GRATITUDE

Gratitude to Davis Best, my crew chief. Davis has been my go-to, rock solid crew chief on most of my marathon swims. He understands the mission. He knows what keeps me calm and what pisses me off; at feedings he knows what information to provide, and what information to withhold. I have implicit faith and trust in Davis; his participation in my swims have contributed greatly to my successes. He is the gatekeeper, and my connection to the above-water world.

Gratitude to Evan Morrison, my observer. Evan helped me appreciate the many technical aspects of this swim. He made this complex swim route scrutable for me, and then when the bay misbehaved, he provided some adaptive and creative thinking that allowed me to be successful. Evan observed my 2015 Estero Bay Swim, and when he participates in my swims as an observer, I am aware of his deep attentiveness to the unfolding events; his skill at perceiving, parsing, and recording the most salient features of the swim; his calming influence onboard the boat; and his unabashed love for this sport.

I was marginally acquainted with Bryan Temmermand and Sylvia Lacock (Pacific Open Water Swim Company) before this swim. They co-piloted my swim, and their participation as escort pilots greatly enhanced the likelihood of my successfully completing RTAI. Bryan and Sylvia are very comfortable on boats in The Bay; they are passionate about swimming, about escorting, and about their duty station to provide comprehensive and professional escorting services to marathon swimmers. Their “hands-on” efforts were much in evidence—take for example the worksheet to the right, which identified the expected inbound/outbound ship traffic

Mr. Ralva 0515 → Chief Madras

Monitor 14 Operations - 72

West Side.

Inbound

NAME	#10	PILOT	GGB	Channel
✓ Ever Vista	0400	0445	0500	South of Alcatraz → Oak Point
✓ Grand Amross	0500	0545		South of Alcatraz - Cruise Ship
⊙ Blue Ridge Hwy	0500	0530	0615	Deep water - Oak ↳ Divert to east side
APL Singapore	0630	0715		South of Alcatraz - Oak
⊙ Regatus Voyager	0800	0915	0930	Deep water - Oak (20 + 10/15) - New Point Rock 10° W

Outbound

Name	#11	PILOT	GGB	Channel
MR Experience	030	0330	0400	Deep Water
Aritios	0330	0415		Deep Water
⊙ APL Singapore	0800	0830		Deep Water

that we would likely encounter during my swim. They were alert, competent, energetic, attentive, and confident; I was aware of their muted eagerness for my swim to be successful, and they celebrated in what eventually turned out to be a successful swim.

Now, granted, I was the one that ultimately performed the heavy lifting to get this swim accomplished. But each of these four people were critical lynchpins in this project, and without each of them performing their duties, I’d never have achieved success in this horrific, and wonderful, swim – the Round-Trip Angel Island.



(...basking in the victory at sea...)

Photo by Evan Morrison

END