Alcatraz Swim
by Pax Beale

Recently, I was asked to describe my three-plus mile Alcatraz swim in San Francisco Bay, which I did 25+ years ago, but which I remember vividly today. Just to make your day, I share my memory of the event with you.

A side comment: I didn't know how to swim eight weeks before my 50th birthday, so I decided to teach myself. I had only been a playground jock previously. I bought a book by James "Doc" Councilman, swim coach at Indiana University, where he coached Mark Spitz.

I read the chapters one at a time, then went to the waters of Aquatic Park on the Bay in SF and waded in. Each day I added a little more swimming knowledge. Then after 12 days I went in over my head. I needed a goal to sustain interest, so I decided that since no one had ever swum to Alcatraz at night in the pitch dark, I would have that as a target on my 50th birthday. Unfortunately for me, my birthday is in mid-December! Brrrr!

So without wet suit or fins, I jumped in at 7:18 p.m. at Aquatic Park and headed for Alcatraz. A Blue & Gold Line tourist boat was to follow with a group of about 200 people, hopefully, to celebrate my birthday after the swim. The plan was for them to pick me up at Alcatraz. Unfortunately, the Blue & Gold boat was too big to get to the pier at the Dolphin Club in Aquatic Park to pick up the 200 party people.

So, I took off solo. I had to go. The 200 had been a complete surprise birthday party for me and my lady friend of the time (before Sophie) had invited everyone I knew, so I had to go!

The 200 walked through Fisherman's Wharf back to the Blue & Gold Line pier while I headed for Alcatraz solo, hoping that ultimately the boat would find me.

Actually the distance isn't that great. However, for a beginner in the pitch dark and alone, it was a challenge. The Coast Guard heard about the swim and stopped all boat traffic for fear I would be run over. It hadn't been a concern to me at first, because I was to have a boat following me. However, with all those people there for my surprise birthday party which was to follow the swim, I had to go it alone and hope for the best.

About every four to five strokes, I remember I had to look up because the tides kept pushing me in the wrong direction; once, I was out in the middle of the Bay! Also, I had learned to swim in the waters of Aquatic Park, but once I exited the Park waters for the Bay, the water temperature dropped to 41 degrees Fahrenheit and the Golden Gate always runs an at least a 15 mile per hour wind, which was going over my already cold back.

I had not planned on these two things. Also, I would have been embarrassed for anyone to be there to see my so-called swimming "skills."

A little anecdote: about halfway to Alcatraz, I looked up and thought I was going to be run over by a huge freighter. I swam like crazy to get out of the path of the freighter. As it turned out, it had stopped (remember the Coast Guard's warning?) and was only drifting. More on the freighter, later.

Finally I got to within 50 yards of Alcatraz, when suddenly I heard the song "Our Sturdy Golden Bear," the Cal fight song. I looked up and the Blue & Gold tourist boat had found me.

I finally touched on Alcatraz, the boat picked me up, and back we went to SF.

The party started, but I had to stay in the sauna for an hour. Ultimately I made it to the party, downstairs in the Dolphin Club at Aquatic Park.

The two highlights for me were the shock of the wind coming through the Golden Gate on my back, and fighting the tides once I was in the Bay.

The biggest shock to me was in the middle of the party, when four sailors in foreign uniform entered my Dolphin Club surprise party in search of me. When I confronted them, they gave me a box, and through broken English said they were Russian sailors from the boat I had encountered in the middle of the Bay. The box had 12 bottles of vodka and a note signed by the Captain of the boat that said, "Two strangers meet in the dark in the cold waters of the San Francisco Bay, and they are bonded together forever. Congratulations on your 50th!"

Eight weeks later at 6:00 a.m. I swam again. This time a rowboat followed me as I went out to Alcatraz, then completely around it, and back inside Aquatic Park to the Dolphin Club. I was told only three had ever done it before, two of whom were Olympic swimmers. That distance should have been about three miles plus, but you can't swim it in a direct line because you have to "play" the tides. There are two high tides and two low tides every 24 hours, so you have to figure out how to work with them. God only knows how far I actually swam!

That distance became serious to me. Well, the one-way trip at night was serious, and one mile at that time was a challenge to me, but most of you could probably go that distance blindfolded. It was the tides and the wind that made it so difficult.

For the record, if Michael Phelps was swimming out the Golden Gate at a world record pace while the tide was coming in, he would be moving backwards! The slower one swims, the more important it becomes to time the swim for the period between when the tide slows from entering the Bay and shifts to exiting the Bay. The old-timers at the Dolphin Club can tell a swimmer the best time to attempt their swim.

Of those who had swum the round trip before, two were on the U.S. Olympic Water Polo team and the other was also an excellent swimmer. Don't laugh, but with the tides, etc., my round-trip swim took 2 hours 48 minutes and 13 seconds. Water temperatures then were about 54 degrees Fahrenheit.

Because of the tides, you can't swim in a straight line. When I jumped in I headed for Sausalito, and on my return journey I headed for Pier 39, not the entrance to the waters of Aquatic Park from where I started. But the tides slowed me to a standstill, so I targeted going direct to the Aquatic Park opening and on inside to the Dolphin Club. I was told that for it to count as a swim, I had to get out where I went in.

The tides pushed me just past the Aquatic Park opening, so I grabbed the concrete on the pier that isolates the Aquatic Park waters from the Bay. I had to physically pull myself down to get below the strong tide at the water's surface, then pull myself along, gripping the concrete to avoid being swept away. The water moved more slowly the deeper I went. I could only move a few feet at a time toward the opening that I had missed, then surface again to breathe. I remember repeatedly coming up for air, then diving deep again and pulling myself along back to the opening, hand over hand on the side of the concrete pier.

I was just going to reference the swim, but as I write this, my memory recalls the incident stroke by stroke, so I punish you with a play-by-play experience.

By repeatedly diving and surfacing, then diving again I was able to pull myself (not swim) against the current along the rough concrete pier wall under the water's surface until I reached the opening to the Aquatic Park waters. The deeper I went, the less resistance there was to pulling myself forward.

However, I was making myself a bloody mess as I kept banging into the concrete pier. Concrete is not smooth!

Finally, I got out of the Bay and into the Aquatic Park waters, where I headed for the Dolphin Club. Actually, I don't remember the cold at that point, because I was so numb from head to toe. I was not in pain. Even my mind seemed like a blur, but I continued inside the waters of Aquatic Park to the Dolphin club.

My support who trailed me in a rowboat observed I was forgetting to breathe! I was stroking my arms constantly, but my head remained face down in the water as I somehow had commenced to neglect to breathe.

So, using good judgment, my support in the rowboat took one oar and banged it into the water about six inches from my head. The jarring impact of the water hitting my head awakened me to the need to lift my head out of the water and take a breath. This routine was repeated about ten times over the last 25 yards of the swim.

I got out of the water at the exact same spot I went in. I was so tired and dizzy I couldn't stand up, so I was carried in to the sauna at the Dolphin Club.

I was burned out on swimming, and today I just lift weights.

At the time of finishing both of the Alcatraz swims, I was just too cold and physically exhausted to bask in any glory; and in the round-trip swim, I was also a bloody mess.

I certainly didn't impress anyone, because swimming is a lonely, anti-social endeavor…particularly in the middle of San Francisco Bay in the pitch dark or at 6:00 a.m. in the morning.

If you believe one's life can be measured by the sum of all of their personal experiences, then my Alcatraz swims certainly contributed to my life's accumulation of experiences, as the memory of those swims is engraved within me.

However, in the big picture of life, those swim experiences can only be a small blip among the compound multi-experiences of one's entire life. The accumulation of personal experiences is what makes life. It's the accumulation that counts, not any individual one.

Bottomline Beale says: never stop creating experiences in your life!