

Barney's Channel Swim Tale

My name is Barney, I am a bear, I am 7 inches tall and I am pink, actually I am only 6 ½ inches tall and sort of purple puce colour. Roger Allsopp says that it is important to feel comfortable with yourself rather than to worry how other people see you, so I am pink and I am 7 inches and I am happy with that. I have become the mascot of The Pink Ladies, I have seen them suffering some very very bad times, but I also get to go on holidays with them too. I have seen how they cope and I think that they are wonderful people and I feel privileged to know them.

Last week with very little warning and not so much as a by your leave I was told that I had to go to England with this retired old geezer Roger Allsopp and watch him swim The English Channel. Apparently he knew a lot of The Pink Ladies and they have been very kind and donated a lot of money to some new fangled Breast Cancer Research that he was involved in. They wanted to make sure that he went all the way to France on his own and did not cheat. I suppose that I was to be an official observer, anyway he said kind things about my height and my being pink so the deal was on. I usually travel as hand luggage but on this occasion I was bundled into an old swimming bag and had to share accommodation with a rubbery old hat, a pair of goggles and some old Speedo's which did not look very substantial. In the darkness I slept all the way to Dover. At the Travel Inn overlooking Dover harbour I sat on the window sill and looked out to sea, it looked pretty grey and cold and a bit rough.

I met with the other members of the support team, there was Kay, Roger's wife – she was very nice but looked a bit glum and resigned. There was Naomi who was young and had long blonde hair and I liked her. There was Carol a little bit older, perhaps a little severe, I wondered, but she proved to be very kind to me, she was nice. There was Mike Banfield ex military I thought, probably Air Force, very precise, well spoken and his wife Evelyne, younger than Mike, very talkative, excitable and French! I suppose she was going to act as an interpreter.

I heard them talking on the phone to the boat pilot, it did not sound good, rough and windy, the forecast not promising, good, I thought, we will all get some sleep.

At 8pm it all changed – the plan was to meet the boat at 1.15am. On the boat the pilot Neil introduced us to Alison, she has swum The Channel more than anyone else in the world, including a three way crossing, what was the point in that, I thought! Roger seemed very pleased to meet her, then there was Robin, an official observer, he knew Guernsey well as he had competed there in The Masters swim meets and he knew John Eyre so I knew that he was important. "It will be a bit lumpy as we leave the harbour" said Neil. A bit lumpy! All hell

was let loose, excuse my French! Everything that was not fixed down in the boat crashed to the floor, it did not get any better, we switched the lights out and it was pitch black. How do they know where they are going, I wondered, I will never know. Then I heard a great kersplish – Roger had gone over the stern and was swimming to the beach, he climbed out clear of the sea and waved, he did not look very relaxed, the ship's horn sounded. He looked the loneliest man on earth and then he plunged back into the water and started swimming towards France. For the first 2 hours the sea got rougher, I was not allowed on deck, all the decks were awash with water well over my height. I sensed a general concern at the 2 hours stage when Roger was being very sick. It seemed that he was not going to get much benefit from the feeds and Evelyne said that he looked a bit blue around the gills, wherever they were. There was so much noise and movement on the boat, the phone kept going every half an hour or so and someone from Radio Guernsey asked if they could speak to Roger. At the time he was at least 50 yards away, just visible in the darkness and the sea spray. By this time I had begun to feel a little queasy myself and I was cheered to see a slight lightening in the sky to the east and within half an hour we were in broad daylight. We seemed to be surrounded by giant ships ploughing up and down The Channel, I looked anxiously at Neil and Alison, our pilots, but they seemed to know what they were doing. At about 10.10am Mike shouted to Roger that he was just past the halfway stage, I must admit that I had thought that we had travelled further and I think that by the look on Roger's face he thought that we had too. I wondered whether we might be able to turn for home at this stage and get some sleep but it seemed as though after some hesitation Roger gained second strength as he settled into a steady stroke and continued towards France. The support team all worked very hard through the night hour after hour, Evelyne was quite difficult to understand at times, she was getting excited.

Mike kept throwing bottles of feed over the side, waving his arms about and shouting and Naomi and Carol stayed on top pointing the way which we were supposed to go which seemed to vary a lot. Evelyne kept an eye on me, she was very kind enquiring often as to how I felt.

The sun worked its way around the sky although it never got very far above the horizon. Some seagulls started to fly within inches of Roger's head: I think to see if he was still alive or whether he was going to be their dinner. As 4 o'clock approached we were close to the French coast at Cap Gris Nez, a good place to land, I thought, but this was not to be so. The tide had changed and we were being propelled east, it was going to be some time. About an hour later I heard another splash and Naomi disappeared over the side to try to steer Roger towards a distant beach. After much persuasion and cajoling, I personally think that he was confused at this stage, Naomi managed to steer him through the surf past a couple of seals and he was able to walk up the beach, Mission accomplished, I thought, let's get home. When he was clear of the water, he waved to the boat and then he plunged back into the surf to work his way with Naomi back to the boat. Helpers were at hand to get him up the ladder but he did not seem to need them too much, he came into the cabin and sat down, the boat was still heaving about and it wasn't long before he ended up on the floor. I am not a doctor

but to me he did not look good. Naomi, Evelyne and Carol removed his wet Speedo's, they threw a small towel over him to preserve his modesty, from what I could see after so long in the water there was not much to hide, the towel was, I think, superfluous, they then zipped him into a body bag which looked like a big babygro supplied by St John Ambulance and Rescue. Slumped on the floor Roger then proceeded to fill buckets with sea water that he had been drinking during the crossing, that remains a puzzle to me as to why he should have chosen to swallow so much. Mike took charge of the buckets and returned the contents back to the sea, recycling at its best, I thought, the boat turned for home but then I thought that we were in trouble. The whole of the bow disappeared under the water, it took some time to re-establish order before we could set back towards Dover. The boat battled through the seas for about 3 hours, Roger remained on the floor in the foetal position, stirring only occasionally to try in vain to fill yet another bucket.

Once back in Dover we all disembarked and met Kay and Frank Le Compte, Frank had flown over to be at the finish. It was quite emotional to see Roger and Kay embrace, I do not think that Kay thought that she was going to see him again. The swim had taken 15 ½ hours and we had all been on board for nearly 20 hours. The winds had been blowing force 4, rising to 5 or 6, the water temperature between 16 and 17 degrees. Although I had been dry inside, the support team had been stepping around the decks nearly knee deep in water. Everyone seemed very excited when it was all over, I personally found it difficult to understand the sense of it all, all that effort for a brief visit to a beach in France lasting only a few minutes.

The next day the purpose of it became clear, we visited a sort of shrine called 'The White Horse', the walls were adorned with written messages from previous Channel swimmers, people from all over the world, Roger added his own words '30.08.06 Roger Allsopp OAP, Guernsey's youngest so far! Empowered by Hope, good friends, and a very brave support team, wind force 5-6 E-F 15 hours 30 minutes' so that was it, not quite. Just before we left Dover Alison arrived with a congratulatory card 'Congratulations Roger you are the oldest British swimmer to successfully cross The Channel'. Personally I could not have cared less how old he was, I was looking forward to getting back to The Pink Ladies and a normal life!