

# The Killer Channel

It is pitch black. At quarter past five in the morning, I jump into the cold water and swim from the boat to the craggy shore close to Donaghadee. I've been told to swim to the rocks, stand on one so that I am out of the water from the waist up, and then, when I hear a whistle from the boat, to start swimming.

The boat is an inflatable motor boat with a roof over a small section of it. There is only just enough space for our kit, my team Kate and Ina, observer Olive, organiser Pàdraig, and pilot Charles.

I swim towards the rocks. Soon they are all around me. In the darkness, I find one that seems suitable. I climb onto it carefully and wait. But I hear no whistle. I'm not sure if it's because of my earplugs or because I should be further out of the water. Uncertain what to do, I wait a while longer and then just start swimming, hoping it's okay. I swim for the boat, which is now illuminated with glow sticks so that I can see it. It seems my start was fine, because no one on the boat says anything once I reach it. And so I begin swimming alongside the boat, into the darkness and towards Scotland.

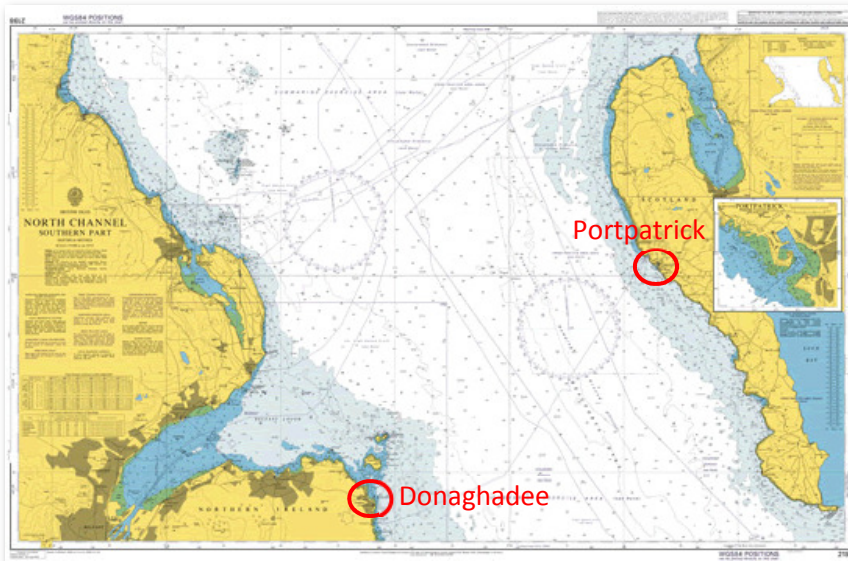


Donaghadee, 5:16 a.m.: The swim begins

I've been told to swim fast for the first three hours, so I go out hard. I make my strokes as powerful as possible and refuse to take it easy. This is the start of my North Channel Swim, and it's not hard to keep up the pace. My arms are well rested and the water is calm at this time of day. There is almost no wind to ruffle the smooth surface of the ocean. These are the kinds of conditions I want – preferably all the way to Scotland!

The North Channel is the part of the Irish Sea that lies between Northern Ireland and Scotland. Thirty-five kilometres of water separates Donaghadee in Northern Ireland from Portpatrick in Scotland. This isn't actually the shortest route between the two countries, but it is the one that is swum today, and the one that is officially recognised as the North

Channel Swim. Mercedes Gleitze was the first swimmer to attempt the crossing. Her first swim in 1928 failed, and although she tried again several times, she remained unsuccessful.



Admiralty Chart 2198 North Channel Southern Part (for a swim to be recognized as a North Channel Swim, it must be undertaken within this area)

It was not until 1947 that British swimmer Tom Blower successfully made the crossing. Tom's swimming style was very much his own – a combination of freestyle arms and a breaststroke kick. For decades, "Torpedo Tom" remained the only swimmer to have achieved this feat.

Throughout the 1950s and 60s, many outstanding swimmers attempted the crossing. None of them succeeded, leading the press to (rather sensationally) dub the strait the "Killer Channel". Eventually, in 1970, Kevin Murphy became the second swimmer to make the crossing. In 1988, Alison Streeter became the first women to succeed. Her superb time of 9 hours and 53 minutes remains the second fastest time overall to this day.

But what is it that makes this swim so special? The water temperature in the North Channel only gets above 14°C in exceptionally hot summers. During the swimming season, swimmers have to be prepared for temperatures of between 10 and 14°C – and the water in the shipping lane can be even colder. As for protection against the cold: only normal swimming trunks and costumes, silicon or latex caps, and fat are allowed. No wetsuits. A great many swimmers are forced to give up because of hypothermia.

In addition, the North Channel is chock-full of jellyfish. The warmer and calmer the water is, the more jellyfish there are. The most dangerous variety in the North Channel is the lion's mane jellyfish. They can be huge, with poisonous tentacles that stretch for several metres. If you come into contact with the tentacles too often, you risk unconsciousness or even death. Then there are all the other varieties of jellyfish, which might not be dangerous but are certainly very painful.

And as if all that wasn't enough, the North Channel has currents that make swimming extremely difficult. The powerful tidal currents in the Irish Sea mean that a vast amount of water has to pass between the two landmasses – Northern Ireland on one side, Scotland on

the other – and change direction every six hours. This creates strong currents that are highly unpredictable and can often put a premature end to a North Channel attempt.

On the Scottish side, the tides create an offshore current that, during spring tides and some neap tides, can be powerful enough to prevent any swimmer breaking through it. As a result, swimming is only possible during certain neap tides. Even then, you are still likely to encounter an offshore current on the Scottish side.

Swimmers, therefore, have to be guided through the current well. They must be ready to sprint for anything from 30 minutes to an hour during the swim. If everything goes to plan, they will reach the offshore current and have to break through it. That means pushing as hard as they can again on the last six kilometres – another challenge that ends in failure for many.

The first hour of my swim seems endless. I keep thinking about what lies ahead of me, and I have serious doubts about this undertaking. Then, finally, it's time for my first feed. That means I've managed an hour. A bottle of warm carbohydrate drink and another containing half a banana are thrown down to me, one after the other. I eat and drink quickly so I can continue swimming. The golden rule of channel swimming is imprinted on my mind: A feed is a feed, not a rest! If you spend too long eating, the current will force you off course and seriously reduce your chances of success.



Dawn in the North Channel

By the time the second feed comes around – an hour-and-a-half into the swim – the day is starting to dawn. The clouds are hiding the sunrise, so I'm just aware of the world around me becoming brighter. My mind is filled with the usual thoughts and doubts. What lies ahead? It's still so far to go. Will I be able to stand the cold? Of course I'm cold. At this point, the water is 13.1°C and the air temperature is just 11°C. Plus, it's overcast. Still, I don't feel bad so I just keep swimming. The wind picks up a little and creates some waves, which makes things a bit harder for me. The waves are coming from behind, though, so I hope they'll push me forwards.

My thoughts turn to my friends, to good conversations we've had, and to the enjoyable time I've just spent in Ireland. I arrived almost eight weeks before starting my swim so that I could prepare for the conditions (especially the cold) in the North Channel. Early on, during the Cork Distance Week, I swam almost 100 kilometres in open water over nine days. After a week of recovery with much less swimming than usual, I dialled my training back up to as much as 55 kilometres per week – all of it in tough conditions, all of it in the open water.

During my time in the south of Ireland, I received an incredible amount of support from the local open water swimmers. I rarely had to swim alone, with other swimmers often joining me for at least part of my route. And wherever I swam, the scenery was spectacularly beautiful. So although the training was tough, all these things made it much easier for me and I realised that this preparatory phase was actually very valuable in itself. I no longer saw it as just torturous preparation for a swim that I might not even finish. Instead, it became a wonderful time spent with friends and filled with good experiences.

In the North Channel, I think back on those weeks and use the memories as a positive stimulus for my swimming. And it works. I'm cold and everything hurts, but I focus my thoughts on the good times and it stops me feeling bad.

After about two hours, the first message appears on the whiteboard, telling me that I'm one sixth of the way there. I'm not wearing a watch, but I count my feeds so I always have a rough idea of my time. I use the information to calculate my finish time and come up with 12 hours, which seems far too fast to me. I put it down to the current coming from the waves behind me. The water is becoming a lot rougher now. A strong wind gets up, bringing with it big waves that make swimming difficult. But I don't let it bother me. I just keep on going, and find that I can handle it well. My open water training in Ireland is paying off. I keep telling myself that the waves are pushing me towards Scotland, which helps me stay reasonably positive. Unfortunately, that's not actually what's happening: The waves are now coming too much from the side to be any use in pushing me towards my goal. From the boat comes an almost apologetic message telling me that this wind wasn't in the weather forecast and really shouldn't be here at all. They keep telling me that it will get better.



A feed stop with a warm carbohydrate drink

Whenever I stop for a feed, I have to pull my swimming cap back into place – not easy when your fingers are stiff from the cold. It's incredibly annoying, and takes up valuable time. When I start swimming again, the cap slowly slips back up my head. I clearly got channel grease on it when I was greasing up on the boat, and it just refuses to stay put. I'm worried that I'll lose my earplugs. The water is so cold that I'd get an ear infection in no time, and that might mean the end of my swim. So I pull the cap back over my ears every chance I get.

The sun is fully up now, and that's when I spot my first jellyfish. Fat, fleshy bodies and nasty long brown tentacles. It's a miracle I didn't come into contact with any while it was still dark. Now that I can see them, I almost always manage to avoid them. I either swim over them, make myself as flat as possible, or dodge sideways. Only once do I get stung, on my right forearm. It hurts, but it's not serious. I recognise the pain from earlier swims, so I know it's not a lion's mane jellyfish. I swim on, thinking: "You bastards. Is that the best you can do?"

After three hours, I get a hot drink as we agreed before the swim. It's supposed to be either hot chocolate or (and only if I'm having stomach problems) ginger tea and honey. Luckily, my stomach is fine so I'm looking forward to a hot chocolate. But I get ginger tea. What's worse, it's really spicy and I can barely taste any honey. I'm disappointed.

Before I pass the four-hour mark, another message appears on the whiteboard, telling me I'm two-sixths of the way there. I calculate again and come up with a finishing time of less than 12 hours, which makes me very happy. The waves really seem to be helping, and I expect to hit three-sixths in advance of six hours.

The sun comes out for a while and the clouds all disappear. The team on the boat take off their thick jackets. I'm happy about the sun, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm freezing. The wind is still blowing hard – up to 18 knots, according to the pilot. Then the weather changes again. It closes in, the sky turns completely grey and the rain begins. For a while it rains hard. This is Ireland in the summer. After blowing for hours, the wind finally eases up properly, and the water becomes a lot calmer. The air temperature remains cold, at around 11°C, but the water temperature rises a tiny bit. Close to Scotland, it hits 13.9°C.



The sun breaks through for a while

I'm so focused on my swimming that I'm only vaguely aware of these things. I just keep moving, meter by meter, stroke by stroke, towards Scotland. I am desperate to succeed. Reaching Scotland is the only thing that matters in my world now.

Well before I reach the halfway point, the backs of my thighs start cramping badly. The same thing happened when I was swimming the English Channel, and during other long-distance swims, so I know that the cramps will be with me now until the end. And that's what happens – they just keep coming back. Feeds are the worst because I have to use a breaststroke kick to stay above water while I drink. But because I've already experienced this, I know that although the cramps are painful and annoying, they won't force me to give up.

Another message appears on the whiteboard: "Sprint for 30 minutes". I've been swimming for almost six hours by now, so of course I'm exhausted. But I also know that I'm in the North Channel, and I can't afford to be weak. So I pull myself together and give it my best: I increase the tension in my upper body, turn my arms over faster, and put as much power into my stroke as I can.

I look over at the boat and see thumbs pointing upwards. It seems like I'm doing fine. I pull myself through the water as fast as I can. The thumbs-up signs keep coming from the boat, but the half-hour feels endless. I'm not imagining things: in the end, I'm made to sprint for 45 minutes so that I'm in a better position in the tide. Finally, I'm given the sign and can go back to swimming at my normal speed.

I know I must be six hours in when I'm told to stop for another hot drink. It's ginger tea again. I'm disappointed and bark up at the boat: "What about a hot chocolate for once?" This signals the start of the Chocolate Crisis, as it turns out that the chocolate powder never made it onto the boat. I later learn that Pàdraig was the one who eventually solved the crisis – by mixing his chocolate bar and some chocolates with milk and hot water to produce a hot chocolate for the next drink.

With no news from the whiteboard about reaching three-sixths of the way, I know now – over six hours into the swim – that I won't finish in 12 hours. I keep waiting for the sign. It's a very long time coming. The next feed passes, and the one after that. Then, finally, it comes. I've been swimming for more than seven hours and have reached halfway. So it looks like I'll finish in over 14 hours, which seems perfectly realistic.

Jellyfish keep appearing around me, and I have to navigate my way past whole swarms of the creatures. But I'm not as focused as I was at the beginning, and barely make any effort to dodge them. As a result, I often come into contact with their tentacles. Fortunately, my skin is so numb from the cold that the pain isn't as bad as it was at the start. I've almost stopped caring. It's only when I shower the next day, and feel like my whole body is burning, that I realise a lot more tentacles caught me than I thought.

Feed after feed goes by. The only thing that's keeping me going now is the will to succeed. I swim and swim. My head is almost entirely empty of thoughts. I just swim – on and on, whatever happens, I'll just keep swimming until I reach Scotland.

After nine hours, I finally get a hot chocolate thanks to Pàdraig's melted chocolate bar. I'm pleased, but I don't want to waste any time so I down it in one gulp. Again, I'm disappointed – I'd imagined it would be a nicer experience.

Eleven hours in, I get another message from the boat: "Go hard, now!" I know that this is where I have to break through the offshore current on the Scottish side. If I fail, I've got no chance of ever reaching Scotland and the whole thing will have been in vain. The dry comment Pàdraig made during our pre-swim briefing comes back to me: "This is where the swim really starts".

I'm desperate to reach Scotland, so I give it absolutely everything that's still left in me. I fight so hard, and I'm amazed that after all this time in the water I really can still push. All those long training sessions where I accelerated at the end are paying off. My efforts even extract some approving words from the otherwise taciturn pilot: "He swims like fuck!" I fight and fight. During one feed, Ina shouts down to me: "Pàdraig says it's no longer a question of if you'll make it, but when you'll make it." That reassures me; I'm clearly making progress. But still I have my doubts. I've got hours to go yet, and a lot can happen in that time. So I keep up the fight.



Scotland in sight

By now, the land is really quite close. I can clearly make out the houses of Portpatrick. Even I now realise that nothing can go wrong from here. My normal swim-down pace would almost be enough to get me to shore. Tension leaves my body and I allow myself to slow down – after all, I'm nearly there and I don't want to wear myself out any more. It's a bad decision, though, because what I don't know is that I'm going downhill fast. I'm no longer fully with it mentally, and I start swimming slower, much slower, than I realise. I even stop every now and again to check and see how far I still have to go. My swimming becomes sloppy and my stroke rate plummets. I swim like that for almost a full half-hour.

During the last hundred metres, I grab another handful of jellyfish. I feel the fat body make contact with me, and its tentacles cover my left arm. I'm almost indignant – there was really no need for that so close to the end of my swim.

Then, right before the end, with just a few metres to go until I reach the rocks, I really fall apart. My swimming cap comes off, which doesn't matter at all at this point – all I have to do is swim to the rocks and touch one. But instead of just ending the thing, I start looking for my cap in the water. When I find it, I swim over to the boat and try to throw it aboard. I miss and try again, completely ignoring the shouts coming from the boat. I'm so exhausted that I'm not with it at all any more. Finally, I start swimming towards the rocks, seeking out dry land at a snail's pace.



The last few metres before reaching Scotland

Before the swim, Pàdraig had told me that it was too dangerous to climb ashore, so the swim would end when I touched a rock. But in the moment, I forget all of that and instead start looking for a place where I can climb out of the water. Big waves force me against a rock, which leaves me with cuts on my hands and backside.

What I don't know is that my swim has long since finished. I'm in shallow water, perhaps half a meter deep, and surrounded by rocks. Waves roll over me from behind.

At 7:20 p.m., the observer officially declares the swim to be over. Just seconds later, Pàdraig removes his clothes and jumps into the water to bring me back to the boat. He grabs me by the hand and pulls me along behind him. I finally understand that I've finished, and use my free arm to swim along. When I try to climb the ladder, my thighs cramp badly, but with



Pàdraig's help I manage to get aboard. I've made it! I swam from Ireland to Scotland in 14 hours and 24 minutes!



On the boat after the swim

The team use all the warm water left in their flasks to give me a kind of shower. The warmth feels wonderful. Four people remove as much channel grease from my body as they can using Fairy Ultra, and help me get dressed. I'm not capable of doing anything on my own. Under the circumstances, though, I'm fine. I'm cold, but not hypothermic, and just completely exhausted.

Eventually I'm wearing every item of clothing that we have, plus my Dryrobe. Blankets are wrapped around my legs and upper body. On the way back to Ireland, I gradually come back to myself and regain my senses. I am utterly drained but completely happy. Our small inflatable motor boat proves advantageous now, as it's very fast and we reach Bangor harbour in just over an hour.

At the harbour, the others take our equipment back to the car. I sit on a bench because my legs are still cramping and I can't walk. We say goodbye to the boat's crew and then it's just the three of us again.

We call a taxi to take us from Bangor to Kircubbin, where we're staying. Once there, I start coughing. At first I just bring up phlegm, but then it turns into phlegm and blood. We discuss what to do and end up calling the emergency services. An ambulance arrives about an hour later to take us to casualty in Belfast. I'm still cold, and the paramedics turn the heat in the ambulance up so high that everyone else starts sweating. I'm also on oxygen because the oxygen content in my blood is very low.

At the hospital, the doctors carry out all manner of tests. Clad in my Dryrobe and jogging bottoms, I could easily pass for a homeless person. With each new nurse who appears, we have to explain why I'm still smeared all over in channel grease. Eventually, everyone in casualty knows that I'm the one who just swam to Scotland, and I get a lot of compliments.

It's now hours since I finished the swim, but my body temperature is still low – below 36°C – so I'm given an electric blanket. The oxygen levels in my blood are also still too low, so the

doctors keep me on oxygen. But I'm increasingly recovering from the exhaustion now. I'm not tired anymore and feel a whole lot better. And I'm delighted that my swim was a success.



In casualty in Belfast

Eventually they do a lung scan and the doctor tells me that I developed pneumonia during my swim. I had no idea. It was caused by bacteria that I inhaled from the sea foam. I'm put on intravenous antibiotics and have to take antibiotic pills for a week to fight the bacteria. At around 5 a.m., we take a taxi back to Kircubbin.

I've finally made it to our flat, and into bed. The sun is already coming up, but I struggle to sleep. I'm still too keyed up. The swim demanded everything of me. At the end, there was nothing left. I had to use all of my experience, all my training, every inch of my physical swimming abilities, and my very last drop of energy. But it was worth it: I am now the 52nd swimmer and the second German to ever swim the Killer Channel.



The Dream Team: Pàdraig, Ina, me, Kate

Translation by Jen Metcalf