



ZERO TO *hero*

RYAN STRAMROOD AND TEAM
BRAVE BELOW-FREEZING WATERS
TO COMPLETE THE ANTARCTICA
ICE MILE CHALLENGE

It is -1°C and it's as deadly as it is impossible to compute the pain and mental depths we know we'll have to visit – not just to complete our challenge, but to survive it. How does one end up here, I ask myself, not for the first time in my swimming career!

It was Ram Barkai's idea, and perhaps the next natural progression in a series of ultra-extreme swimming challenges that our small team has dared to take on in many a distant, inhospitable and remote corner of this planet. We have pushed ourselves and known human boundaries for some years now, and our confidence and experience in extremely harsh and dangerous conditions has grown. "Let's attempt an official Ice Mile south of the Antarctic Circle," Barkai suggested, "in

ABOVE: Ryan Stramrood trying to keep his head down and avoid panicking



Walking down the gangway of the Ocean Diamond anchored in Neko Harbour in Antarctica is nothing short of petrifying. One hundred and eighty cheering passengers look down on us from the decks above in morbid fascination and disbelief as we each remove the final warm jacket covering our Speedo and finally stare the deep, dark, ice-littered Antarctic water directly in its face.

strict accordance to the rules set out by the International Ice Swimming Association."That is, a one-mile swim (1 609 metres) in waters of 5°C or less, wearing only a Speedo-type costume, one neoprene cap and a pair of goggles.

Barkai, Kieron Palframan and I had recently succeeded in completing the world's first official Ice Mile north of the Arctic Circle. As tough as it was, it was

conducted under controlled and secure circumstances – vital ingredients, which I did not realise how much I had undervalued until arriving in Antarctica.

It took many years of negotiations before we found an Antarctic expedition company willing to assist us in our endeavour – a tireless process with which Barkai persevered, until one company gave in and agreed to assist. Its agreement

included the arrangement of vital permissions and permits from Antarctica's strict environmental controlling bodies to make the ship's medical, zodiac, kayak and crew facilities available to us; to schedule a time slot in a busy passenger ship itinerary; and, despite numerous legal indemnities we signed, to accept the inevitable responsibility for what was no doubt to be a very dangerous mission.



The company's fears lay far beyond the ice water threat to our lives, but also the highly unpredictable and deadly leopard seals and orca that populate these waters.

Soon we were fully committed and our preparations began. A regime of tough physical training to ensure peak fitness followed but, more importantly, a series of cold challenges or 'ice baths' to prepare the mind. When human flesh meets ice water, the reaction is intense and panic is the natural reaction. In our case, for this challenge, panic could be deadly. So we needed to subject ourselves to 0°C water to help the mind process this reaction and to figure out how to simultaneously perform at our physical optimum, to remain mentally together and, ultimately, complete the mile distance once we arrived in Antarctica.

There are extremely few existing precedents at this level and even less research out there to help us understand the consequences of what we were undertaking. So our training is both pioneering and a discovery process in itself.

The departure date arrived so quickly. Leaving families once again to venture into the deep unknown, where only the

TOP LEFT: Ryan Stramrood in mid-air, about to feel the full impact of -1°C water

TOP MIDDLE: Barkai and Stramrood in first 50m - 1600 meters to go!

OPPOSITE RIGHT: Passenger view - Stramrood, Barkai, Palframan reaching halfway

significant risks are a certainty, is not easy for either side to navigate. But now we're on the plane - Cape Town to Joburg; Joburg to Buenos Aires; Buenos Aires to Ushuaia; Ushuaia to Antarctica by ship.

Usually this is the point when everyone on the team lets down their hair, we crack open the whisky and melt into the fact that we're away on another incredible adventure. But this time it's different. There is less obvious excitement, less boyish fooling around and far more reserve. We are nervous. Very nervous.

Aboard the ship for a four-day cruise to reach the Antarctic Circle, immediately the swim's logistic planning begins. It soon dawns on us that there will be far more to the logistics than we ever could have planned for.

We discover curveball after curveball in the planning, and it is very unsettling. Recovery facilities are not what we hoped they would be. There's no sauna, no medical equipment beyond the very basic; the expedition doctor is not well-versed in hypothermic recoveries; no emergency evacuations are possible; there's no real way to heat the cabins, no hot water bottles, thermals etc. Each revelation impacts on our state of mind which, to be successful in a mile swim attempt in sub-zero waters, simply must stay in a very focused state.

We head to bed early as the ship rolls violently in the Drake Passage - as it would for many nights to come.

Soon we sail past our first massive mountain of ice. It's a surreal thing to see and quite dramatic in its size. There's just the one iceberg floating in isolation at first,

but within hours the sea is littered with them. The ambient temperature has plummeted and, again, there's more than a pang of butterflies as the reality of it all sets in. We are going to be swimming in this - and we are still heading two days further south!

As we cross over to the Antarctic Circle at 66° South, it dawns on me that my perceptions and expectations of the Antarctic conditions are completely misguided. I suppose through naivety and a lifetime of exposure to sales brochures and Discovery Channel footage, the picture of our swim conditions in my head of pristinely flat, majestically tranquil waters, matched by brilliant blue skies, is so far off base. The actual conditions we are to face could change the swim's difficulty grade tenfold - and this plays significant havoc with our mental preparation. Would the weather conditions ever allow us to make our attempt?

Seven very frustrating days follow. To remain on permanent standby and constant mental readiness, day in and day out, for this extended period is nothing short of torture. Between very poor weather conditions and a prioritised passenger expedition schedule, we are forced to remain in a state of readiness, mostly huddled in our cabins awaiting the go-ahead, with possible swim windows sometimes twice daily. It is an extended emotional roller coaster.

It's 05h30 on the morning of 2 March and the swim is finally on! There's a steady breeze blowing, the water is measured at -1°C, the ambient temperature is 0°C. For an ice mile, flat water is almost essential,



so this is certainly not ideal and there is fairly strong water chop already. But today is the day!

The course is set. We have decided to start and end at the ship: swim 825m out, then 825m back to recovery. A huge amount of planning and preparation takes place in a small amount of time. We have a recovery room ready with heaters and dry towels. We have five Zodiac® inflatable boats in the water, two kayaks, two doctors, leopard seal and orca spotters, GPS handlers, and photographic and video crews are all prepared and deployed. We are 100% ready to go, sitting in our cabins, dressed in Speedo costume, cap and goggles, covered with a thick

flag displayed loudly and proudly. There's a quick team handshake after stripping off the final layers to stand almost naked in the harsh elements, the ship horn bellows, we take a last deep breath and... we are off, diving head first into the below-freezing, deep, dark waters of Antarctica.

Now it's each man for himself. We have individual support teams and need to focus only on staying compos mentis, keeping the stroke rate high without pushing too hard initially and not making any strategic mistakes. Adrenalin is so heavy that we barely notice the intense bite and we all handle the initial shock well.

When warm flesh meets -1°C water, panic is only a blink away. In a matter of

The effects on the body of below-freezing water are devastating and immediate. I can physically feel the deterioration of my body, stroke and mind and it's happening at an amazingly rapid pace.

Still swimming away from the ship to the halfway mark, we try to suppress all thoughts of the return journey to the ship. The first leg seems to take forever. Every stroke counts and every stroke takes concentration. Eye contact with Toks Viviers (my seconder) in the Zodiac® is the only safety I feel. The positive expression on his face and his thumbs-up calms me and confirms the support team is in control and is watching my every move.

As the body shuts down and becomes

As the body shuts down and becomes less and less responsive to the brain's slowing messages, while one is facing down into deep Antarctic waters, it is very easy to be overwhelmed

jacket, awaiting the imminent call from the expedition leaders.

A quick, emotional last-minute video message to Nic and Jesse, my beloved wife and son, and then we're off.

Heart rate is sky high, nerves pounding, adrenalin is pumping as the final go-ahead comes and we walk down the starboard gangway into the bite of the icy breeze.

Although absolutely focused, we can't miss the screaming cheers of 180 passengers scattered across the various elevated decks. We spot the South African

seconds, although we have kayakers allocated to sweep ice from our paths, my head hits a small rock of ice the size of a fist. It's sore, but a great way to drive home the fact that this is a very real sub-zero ice swim – just in case it wasn't already more than apparent. Plenty more collisions follow.

Within the first few minutes, we all realise the 825m 'away' leg of the swim is taking too long. We are in a current and are swimming against it. I find it very hard to breathe without getting a lungful of water.

less and less responsive to the brain's slowing messages, while one is facing down into deep Antarctic waters, it is very easy to be overwhelmed. The feeling of losing the mental battle, succumbing to the cold and sinking into the abyss is very real and it takes a great effort to swim through this with a level, positive mind. A dedicated support crew is an essential umbilical cord – one's lifeline.

The halfway turn around point comes too late. It should have been on 12-13 minutes, but has taken 17 minutes for me



LEFT TO RIGHT: Andrew Chin; Gavin Pike; Ram Barkai; Ryan Stramrood; Kieron Palframan; Toks Viviers

The intrepid Antarctic swimmers

Andrew Chin 1 000m

Ram Barkai 1 250m

Kieron Palframan 1 550m

Ryan Stramrood 1 650m
(official Ice Mile)

Toks Viviers 1 650m (official Ice Mile)

Gavin Pike 1 650m (official Ice Mile)

and I'm ahead of the others. The medical team's cut-off time for emersion was agreed at 35 minutes; thereafter, they will pull us out. It will now be touch and go, as the return leg of the swim would naturally be much slower due to a highly impaired stroke rate.

But there's some hope, as the current we have just fought against is now at our backs. Inside the swimmer's head, none of the above must factor – only a single-minded focus on keeping the arms moving at a stroke rate that maintains forward movement to prevent sinking.

A leopard seal arrives – all 400 kilogrammes of it. It causes pandemonium among the 'spotters' and crew. The passengers see it too, and we should be immediately extracted from the water. But, thankfully, the seal observes us only for a while and in the nick of time disappears as quickly as it arrived.

After the 20-minute mark, my mind is dazed and blurred. Still aware of my immediate surroundings, aware that I'm in danger and aware that my body is not responding well, issues such as time, distance swum and leopard seal danger among others have long since faded. The focus becomes very granular and inward.

Viviers is shouting at me. I can see his lips moving and hands gesturing, but I can't hear him and I can't expend any energy or even a single second trying to decipher the message. My downward spiral is gaining momentum. The only thing that counts is his giving me the thumbs-up. I gather that I must be looking okay. I must still be moving. It's hard to tell. I catch a glimpse of the extended turquoise underside of another smallish iceberg as it disappears into the deep waters and am pleased by the pace it passes me by – I'm still moving forward.

I'm inspired once more to push harder

and make a monumental effort to give a big kick with my legs, which have become dead weights and are dragging me down. But with no blood supply to them, I get the equivalent of an intense electric shock in the groin. It rattles me. My body is not my own and is in distress.

Time is a blur. If I'd been told I was in the water a total of 15 minutes, I would have believed it. But I have just passed the 30-minute mark and am now in a severely dangerous zone. A small part of me knows this, but all I have left is unwavering determination to finish this challenge.

I see the ship's hull under the water; I'm alongside her. I vaguely register cheering. I see Viviers and the Zodiac® crew clapping and screaming. I hear the ship's loud horn bellow once again. Then I see the gangway stairs – the end point. Twenty metres to go. Seems so simple, but I'm on the edge. My body is going to stop responding at any given second. Push. Reach out. Just get one hand to that ladder... Done!

Through the haze of my mind, I know I'm out the water. But I know I have only completed 50% of the challenge. Now comes the real hard part and it's so vital to stay mentally strong. Don't let go.

The recovery process is hard, frightening, painful and confusing. It can probably be compared to the out-of-body experience that some people report when under sedation on the operating table. You are aware of the frenzy of people and activity around you. Some are talking to you, some shouting, some are rubbing you down, some are trying to move you. But you are not really there – at least, not yet.

The period of time between exiting the water to just before the shivering starts is the real danger zone. And this time its duration is greatly extended. No doubt some serious limits have been pushed. But soon the all too familiar, clenched jaw

shivering begins.

The mind starts to reboot as the shower's warm water first brings a level of awareness back. For the first time I see who is helping me and who is reassuring me. I'm sitting on the small cabin-shower floor with 79-year-old Norm, the ship's geologist, holding the handheld shower over my head. Bizarre. The doctor is there and he's smiling. But it'll be another 30 minutes before they'll allow me to move.

Barkai appears from nowhere, shakes my hand and congratulates me. It is only much later that I learn he and Palframan were both unable to finish the swim. It's a huge blow. I feel helpless and despondent. Finishing as a team is as important as the individual achievements, and this news takes so much away.

But it is done. I have turned the corner, am out of danger and the stresses and pressures of the first eight days are left behind as a memento in the icy water. One very real, 31-minutes-and-50-seconds mile completed in -1°C waters in Antarctica!

Why do it? There's no comprehensive answer to this. I can only wish that everyone finds whatever it is in life that gets them off the couch, voluntarily gets them out of their comfort zone – something that frightens them, pushes them to physical and mental extremes, and forces them to rely on teammates and even strangers. It's a beautiful thing. Because succeed or fail, you can only gain extensive richness, knowledge and spirituality from the experience. You'll somehow love your family just that much more and, one day, when your life eventually does flash before your eyes, you'll have a damn fine movie to watch. ©

Visit Ryan's website at www.ryanstramrood.com or check out his Facebook page: *Ryan Stramrood Swimming & Speaking*.